

BEATRICE
ASHLEIGH

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BY

F. E. MILLS YOUNG

AUTHOR OF "THE BYWONNER,"
"GRIT LAWLESS," ETC.

*"Our strength grows out of our weakness.
Not until we are pricked and stung and sorely
shot at, awakens the indignation which arms
itself with secret forces."—EMERSON.*



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**TO
MY MOTHER**

M. V. G.
O. 1-18.

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I

YOU might," Robert Earlton observed, in a tone of reluctant admiration despite its annoyance, "have left him one eye to see clear with. What were you thrashing him for?"

The person who had been thrashed, a boy of thirteen, had fled ignominiously as soon as, through the intercession of his tutor, he had succeeded in escaping from the savage pummelling which his sister, Beatrice, aged fourteen, was inflicting with a close attention to the most vulnerable spots and a disregard for the recognised rules of warfare.

The girl, with a sudden twist of her shoulders, extricated herself from the speaker's grasp, and stood confronting him, her still smouldering rage changing to resentment against his interference. She was a lanky, overgrown child, with a mop of fair hair which at the moment tumbled about her face and shoulders in unlovely disorder; unlovely too was the expression of anger which distorted her features. She was, nevertheless, undeniably pretty—the type of girl who develops into beautiful and graceful womanhood.

The young man who had separated the belligerents,

and who now waited—vainly, it would seem from the girl's sullen silence—for an explanation of the quarrel, surveyed her with the perplexed, reflective scrutiny of a person who feels by no means confident of the powers which his position of tutor conferred. He had been aware for some time of the steady growth of certain feminine qualities in his girl pupil which made for the undermining of his authority. She needed the discipline of a woman, or at least of a man considerably older than himself; the latent womanhood in her rebelled against his control. The decrease in his authority was due to no fault of either; it was, he recognised, the inevitable result of circumstances.

"What," he repeated in the half-hearted manner of one who realises his inadequacy to cope with the situation, "were you thrashing him for?"

The girl threw up her small head proudly, while an increase of angry colour showed in her cheeks. His persistence annoyed her. The chastisement of Charlie had resulted from some ill-considered remark which he had hurled at her in disparagement of her sex. The insult rankled; and, being still in a state of rebellion, she was unmindful to submit to masculine interference. She had vindicated the honour of her sex in chastising her brother. It occasioned her a very unfeminine thrill of satisfaction to know that she had drawn blood and received very little hurt herself. She looked mutinous when Earleton repeated his question, and answered him bluntly.

"I don't see that it is any business of yours," she said.

On reflection he was not sure that it was any business of his; but he could not let it pass at that. Something in the girl's defiant mien, in the hostility in the young eyes, incensed him. It ran through his mind that he would like to shake her. He placed a hand on her shoulder, not with any intention of putting this desire into practice, but in order to ensure her attention.

"Don't be rude," he said, "or I shall be compelled to award you some punishment. I insist on an answer to my question."

She smiled, a cool, exasperating smile that proved beyond the shadow of a doubt how illusionary his authority was. The threat of punishment was an empty threat, and they both knew it. Beatrice had had punishments set her often, but he could not remember these ever being faithfully performed. She attempted, with another abrupt jerk of her shoulders, to shake off the restraining hand. During the contest between opposing wills the last remnant of authority fell away, leaving Earleton denuded of that essential quality and of his dignity through an act of indiscretion that amazed and horrified him as soon as he realised what he had done. It was never quite clear to him how it happened; and only when he felt his face smarting painfully from the effects of the well-merited reproof he received from the strong young hand did he realise the enormity of his conduct. What idiotic impulse had moved him to kiss her?

The girl relieved the awkwardness of the situation by immediately quitting the room; and, recovering abruptly from his surprise, he regarded the well-de-

finest imprint of her fingers in the over-mantle, and stroked his face reflectively while he revolved this unpleasant matter in his mind.

"The devil!" he mused, and meeting the reflection of his own self-conscious eyes, had the grace to look ashamed. "The *devil!*" he repeated, with greater emphasis. And then—"Damn!"

The experiment of educating a girl on the same lines as a boy was, according to his experience, a mistake.

Earlton, being by instinct more of a gentleman than his conduct would seem to warrant, tendered his resignation forthwith, with a full confession, to the father of his pupils, who, a man of peculiar ideas and odd whims, was experimenting according to certain theories of his own in the upbringing of his three motherless children.

The elder boy was then at Sandhurst; the younger was being tutored with his sister by the son of an Oxford professor, and a friend of his own. The education of the girl was to be similar in every respect to the education of her brother. The differences between the sexes, besides the unalterable physical dissimilarities, was not, in Mr. Ashleigh's opinion, a fundamental difference in the mentality of the sexes, but was due to the undevelopment of feminine brain-power. It was his intention to give his daughter every facility and encouragement for the cultivation of her intelligence; and it gave him immense satisfaction to observe that, though far from studious, the quality of her mind was above the average; and the logical deductions of her reasoning powers afforded him keen delight.

His reason for having his children educated as far as possible under his direct supervision was the result of his rooted objection to any religious instruction. He was himself an atheist; but he had no intention to direct their minds towards his way of thinking, or of allowing others this privilege in the matter of direction. He wished them to attain to an age when they would be capable of receiving without prejudice the different theological views, and of forming an independent opinion on the subject of the eternal verities, without having had their minds moulded for them by the orthodox teaching of an effete superstition. He had told Earlton this. It had been the one point on which they had disagreed; but Earlton had been overruled. It was this point which, more than the young man's shamed confession, weighed with him when Earlton offered to resign his post. Plainly, after what had happened, he could not continue to instruct Beatrice. But Beatrice was old enough, and sufficiently intelligent, to grapple with new impressions. He was not afraid for her any longer. She should go to college at the beginning of the new term. In the meanwhile Earlton could take a holiday with Charlie, and continue as the boy's tutor for a further period.

Beatrice Ashleigh, therefore, to her complete satisfaction, was sent to college, where life developed for her on altogether new lines, unfolding a store of unsuspected feminine traditions and ideas which she assimilated reluctantly, with a growing realisation of the circumscribed area of woman's world, and the strictly confined limitation of woman's ambition. These things were new to her, and she chafed under them. But

the tide of custom runs very strong; it must be a powerful swimmer who stems it.

One result of the new system betrayed itself surprisingly after the second year of college. She approached her father during the vacation on the subject of confirmation. She had discussed religious matters with him frequently and freely, and had listened to his views on the subject with attentive interest. On the present occasion she did not enter into any discussion, but simply stated her wish.

"I want to be confirmed," she said.

If Mr. Ashleigh was disappointed he did not show it. He had always encouraged in her a perfect freedom of expression in regard to her views on different matters; and he endeavoured as far as a somewhat cold nature permitted to gain and deserve her confidence. He looked up at her from the chair in which he sat reading and met the diffident eyes fully. They were, despite the diffidence, quite steady and determined.

"You haven't been baptized yet," he answered, in his unemotional way.

She had expected strong opposition; therefore his manner of receiving her request took her somewhat aback.

"I know," she said. "I want to be baptized as well."

"All right," he replied. "You are rather big for that sort of tomfoolery; but, since you wish it, I have no objection."

And so Beatrice was baptized, and subsequently confirmed, in the Christian faith; and no one, herself least of all, suspected that this newly awakened re-

ligious ardour was directly due to an infatuation for an anæmic-looking curate; though the realisation came to her later with a sense of shame for her weakness, and later still with a certain tolerant amusement at the natural absurdity of the thing. Beatrice, for all her father's tutoring, was ever the essentially feminine.

At nineteen she left college, and became her father's close companion and controller of the household. Mr. Ashleigh had hoped that she would qualify for one of the few professions slowly opening to women; but Beatrice showed no desire to take up a particular work. She had no aptitude for study; though she read a great deal as her wayward fancy dictated. She followed the interest of the moment; to specialise was impossible; her interests were vagrant and diverse, and were governed largely by a vivid imaginativeness which rendered concentration difficult, but added immensely to the wonder and beauty of life. At nineteen, with no cares nor responsibilities, with an untroubled childhood to look back upon, and a vista of ease-filled years ahead, the world is a pleasant place and life wholly desirable.

It remained so for Beatrice Ashleigh until at the age of twenty she fell in love. The process of falling in love is an agreeable form of relaxation with many girls. They tumble in and out of that state with equal facility. With Beatrice, however, it was a more serious matter. The affair of the anæmic curate had faded into a dingy memory; it had been at best a girlish conceit, based on his undisguised admiration for herself. Since leaving college she had come in contact

with many men, and was well used to admiration, being a young woman of marked personal attractions both mental and physical. Masculine homage no longer had the power to excite reciprocity; she accepted it as her due, and tendered her favours grudgingly.

Of all the men who came to the house, friends of her brothers for the greater part, only one interested her above his fellows. This was a man some years older than herself, dark, handsome, rather reckless of manner; a soldier by profession, and a friend of Edward Ashleigh. Frederick Hurst took very little notice of Beatrice. He admired her; all men admired her; but his interest did not go beyond that. It was possibly his indifference, which was a novel experience for Beatrice, that piqued her curiosity, and led to her closer observation of him, and eventually to the irresistible, unaccountable desire to force him to notice her. She wanted, more than she had ever wanted anything in her life, to see his rather sombre face lighten at her coming, to have his eye single her out from among the crowd; while Hurst, detached, and unaware, and preoccupied, appeared wholly unconscious whether she was present or not. He was absorbed in his own affairs at that period in their acquaintance; and girls, beautiful or otherwise, had no place in his thoughts.

On the occasion of his first bringing his friend to the house, Edward Ashleigh was moved to ask his sister what she thought of Hurst. His interest in the subject was unusual, so was his tone. Beatrice experienced surprise.

“Nothing,” she answered promptly. “He is a man’s man, and a bit of a bear.”

But if that was the sincere expression of her opinion at the moment it modified considerably as time went on, until, from thinking nothing about him, she came to think a great deal more about him than was altogether good for her peace of mind, or, in view of Hurst’s private life at that time, desirable. But, as the proverb has it, “Quand on aime c’est le coeur qui juge.” Not that Beatrice knew anything of Hurst’s private life. It was, so far as she was able to judge, the same as that of any other young man about town.

II

AFTER his first visit to the house, Beatrice met Frederick Hurst fairly frequently. He was present at several social functions which she attended under the able chaperonage of the Hon. Mrs. Enfield, a woman for whom Mr. Ashleigh entertained a profound admiration and liking, based on what grounds he could not have explained had he been put to it: beyond the virtue of a kindly nature, she was a frivolous, worldly minded woman, with only one idea in regard to girls, which was to marry them well. She favoured the French theory that love develops after marriage if the marriage prove suitable in other respects. It had not developed in her own case; but she admitted compensations.

The suitable settlement of Beatrice was her chief concern after the settlement of her own daughter. The business of arranging the lives of two well-favoured girls occupied her fully and agreeably. It never entered her thoughts that either could disappoint her by arranging her life independently; and in the case of her own daughter she had no reason for apprehension. Ellie was entirely amenable to the maternal guidance, being lazy and unemotional, and preferring the easy path in life. Since she was pretty and popular, particularly with middle-aged men, Mrs.

Enfield felt no anxiety on her account. She had already settled in her own mind on the man she desired for her future son-in-law; and it was a high tribute to her determination that eventually she secured him, in view of the fact that marriage was a condition he had not considered, and had little inclination towards.

Ellie had been at college with Beatrice, and was her particular chum. She was also a chum of Charlie Ashleigh. The latter, who was studying for the Indian Civil Service, and whose prospects were at best doubtful, entertained a hopeless attachment for her—hopeless because, though Ellie liked him, and though Mrs. Enfield was really fond of him, he knew very well that the latter would never sanction an engagement between him and her daughter. Mrs. Enfield refused to take Charlie seriously. No one took Charlie seriously; since he did not take himself seriously, this was not surprising. In any case, he could not have provided for a wife; he could not at that stage provide for himself.

Mr. Ashleigh was well satisfied to leave his daughter in Mrs. Enfield's capable charge. He was something of a recluse himself. Though no one suspected him of delicacy, he was far from being a strong man. He had had a seizure some years previously, and it had made him nervous about himself. He was therefore grateful to Mrs. Enfield for taking up Beatrice; and he encouraged his daughter to regard Mrs. Enfield's house as a second home. He wanted Beatrice to enjoy life, to make the most of her youth and her beauty. He supposed that eventually she would

marry; but he did not concern himself on that point. If he ever gave the matter thought it was to hope that she would marry the right man; that, in his opinion, was more important than a brilliant match. He wanted her to be happy. He knew Mrs. Enfield's views, because she had unfolded them to him.

"With Beatrice's face," she told him, "she should make a great marriage. Girls with wit and beauty are scarce. You mustn't encourage an indifference to ambition. She is too young to realise the importance of these things."

"Dear lady, I place her in your hands," he had answered. "But Beatrice will go her own way. She always has done so."

And Beatrice was pursuing her own way, unsuspected by Mrs. Enfield. It was not the road of ambition she followed; it was not either a happy road; there were many rebuffs to be encountered along the difficult path. Had Hurst been readier of response, Mrs. Enfield must inevitably have discovered Beatrice's secret; but Beatrice was too proud to show her preference for a man who displayed not the slightest interest in herself. She seemed rather to avoid him; and it was this avoidance which, as he grew to know her better, led Hurst first to seek her out as a relief from the readier welcome of other women. He found her society restful. She never seemed to resent it when he sat beside her in silence; neither made any obvious effort to entertain the other. When they came upon a long pause it had not the embarrassing effect which a conversational cul-de-sac produces usually. Frequently these silences ended with a reflective look

at one another and a quiet smile which prefaced some commonplace remark. Hurst never apologised for his dulness; Beatrice would have shown surprise if he had. She was glad when these moody fits of his brought him to her side, melancholy though his society proved at these times. It was a mute testimony to his recognition of her sympathetic understanding that he sought her companionship when out of tune with the rest of his world.

Hurst was home from India on sick leave, following a severe attack of jungle fever. He hated the life out there, he told her, and hoped to get transferred. He wasn't particularly keen on soldiering anyway; it was all routine, and nothing doing. A scrap would brighten things up; but the nations were falling asleep in sleek complacency, and letting their arms grow rusty. He felt that he could better justify his existence in some profession in which he wasn't a cipher.

"Not that it's particularly worth justifying," he added. "One wonders sometimes what one is born for. One is launched upon life irrespective of one's wishes. If I'd been given a choice I'm pretty certain I wouldn't be here. Would you?" he asked, meeting her smiling eyes fully with a morose curiosity in his own.

"Yes, I think I would have ventured that far," she answered. "I'm interested in life."

"Are you? It bores me. That's why I'm such a failure, I suppose, socially. A man who can't interest himself must be fairly poor company, that's certain. It's awfully good of you to listen to my grouching so patiently. Why do you?"

Again he turned his face towards her and regarded her with increased interest, and with a closer scrutiny, a scrutiny that took in every detail of the fair face, leaning back against the cushion of the chair, quietly observant of him. He noted the amber lights in the dark eyes, the pretty curve of the smiling lips, the way in which her hair waved low over the temples, and the sheen of it where the light caught its bright surfaces; noted too the quick warm colour in her cheeks, and the fair transparency of her skin. She was, he decided, and felt surprised that he had not discovered it before, very beautiful.

"I'm wondering," she said, "how life has hurt you to cause you to talk as you do. Don't think," she added hastily on observing that he changed colour, "that I am curious. I'm not. I'm merely trying to explain why the grouching doesn't worry me. Life isn't always kind, I know; though it has dealt kindly with me. I could wish that everyone had so good a time. But knocks mould a man's character."

"Do they?" He laughed briefly. "It's rather an ugly mould. I imagine it depends largely on a man's temperament how he takes the knocks. If he's a good footballer he comes up smiling, and never resents a kick; if he isn't, he grouches."

"The majority of Englishmen are good footballers," she said. "Aren't you?"

"I used to believe so. But I take it I'm rotten bad at everything," he replied.

Shortly after this talk Hurst called at the house, to Beatrice's pleased surprise. It was the first time he had visited there independently. When Edward

Ashleigh had been in town for a few days he had come once or twice in his company, but he had not called formally. He was shy, and at first obviously ill at ease. His manner conveyed the impression that he regretted having yielded to this social impulse and wasted a fine afternoon.

It was unfortunate that on this same afternoon other callers dropped in—a succession of them. They were mostly young people. Charlie had turned up for tea with Earlton, whom he had met casually and invited to return with him; and Ellie Enfield was there, flirting in a corner with her faithful admirer. Beatrice had not seen Earlton since the days when she had been his pupil. The memory of the unfortunate episode which had terminated his tutorship was in the minds of both when they shook hands. A reminiscent smile shone in Beatrice's eyes, in his was open admiration.

"I've always hoped we should meet again," she said. "It's ages ago—over six years—since I plagued your patience beyond endurance. Do you remember what a virago I was at fourteen?"

"I remember you as a very interesting pupil," he replied guardedly.

She laughed a little at that, and the laugh set him entirely at his ease. She remembered—he saw that—and the memory did not affront her.

"You were sometimes aggressive," he ventured. "But you were a good sportsman."

"I was sorry afterwards," she said; and vague and irrelevant though the remark sounded, he apprehended her meaning. "It wasn't such fun at college as I ex-

pected. None of us seemed quite sincere. We posed. I wonder . . . I suppose that's life, in a sense. We affected ideals . . . borrowed what we admired in other people, and lost sight of our individuality."

"That's a fault of the public school system," he said—"to reflect rather than shine independently. But I think you have managed to retain something of your individuality. I catch glimpses."

"A remnant, perhaps," she allowed, and looked pleased. "Anyway, I expect the discipline was good for me. That was the part I liked least."

He seemed amused at this admission, and regarded her with greater attentiveness.

"That's where you always bested me," he said. "Your sex generally contrives to set masculine authority at naught."

"You don't all recognise that," she retorted.

"We don't always allow it," he corrected. "To affect not to see the weak spots is to strengthen one's position."

"Another form of posing," she said, smiling.

"I am glad you don't despise sincerity," he said. "Quite recently I heard truth described as bourgeois. It was insisted that one could only be truthful at the sacrifice of tact."

"I should not have supposed that tact and insincerity were synonymous terms," Beatrice said.

"No," he answered. "The most tactful people I have happened across have been entirely honest. But the dishonest person seldom scruples to apply an engaging term as a euphony for a degenerate quality. A man told me the other day that I was growing bald.

I consider that unnecessarily tactless; but I am persuaded that it was an honest expression of his opinion. A consultation with my glass corroborated the statement. All truth-tellers are not therefore diplomatic."

"Luxuriance in hair is apt to rob the brain of its nourishment," Beatrice remarked consolingly.

"Ah!" he said, and smoothed the back of his hair reflectively. "You prove to me that tact and sincerity are inseparable."

It was at this moment that Beatrice became aware of Hurst's entrance. She turned as the door opened, smiling, some light response to Earlton's remark on her lips. The smile widened and spread to her eyes on perceiving who the newcomer was, and a faint increase of colour showed in her cheeks.

Earlton turned also, in some curiosity to discover who was responsible for the abrupt detachment of interest from himself which he was sensible of in Beatrice's manner, and for the swift, glad look of welcome he detected in her eyes. His glance following hers, he saw standing in the doorway a man of good physique, dark, almost swarthy of complexion, with a resolute, handsome face, and good eyes—eyes that were sombre and somewhat furtive in expression, as though they reflected the embarrassment which gripped Hurst when the door opened upon this unexpected gathering of people, and he came forward reluctantly to the accompaniment of talk and laughter, which hung for a space at his appearance, and went on again after the momentary check in cheerful disregard of the interruption.

"I didn't know you had a party on," he said to

Beatrice in an aggrieved voice, rather as though he considered she had got these people together for the purpose of vexing him, as though she ought to have been better prepared for his coming, even though she had not known of it beforehand.

"I haven't," she answered brightly. "These are all chance callers. You must outstay them. Come over to the table and have some tea."

He followed her, and stood beside her when she gave him his cup, and held it in his hand.

"I'm an awful duffer at this kind of thing," he said. "I hoped I should find you alone. But I suppose you aren't alone very often."

"Try again some other day and you will find your surmise wrong. My father and I generally have tea alone—when I'm in," she added. "But I'm awfully glad you came to-day."

"I'm beginning to be glad too," he said, meeting her eyes and smiling.

It passed through his mind to wonder what there was in this girl which set him so quickly at his ease, and made him pleased to be with her. She did not resemble her brother in the least, and yet some quality common to both, that quality which had caused him to chum readily with Edward Ashleigh, appealed to him equally in her. He could not give it a name. It was something instinctive to which his own nature responded. If she had been a man he would have wanted to chum with her.

It was surprising in consideration of the fragmentary nature of their intercourse how intimate they were becoming; almost from the first they had adopted

the conversational freedom of accepted friendship. He felt, without understanding why, grateful to her. Girls as a rule did not interest him; she had not interested him at one time. He retained a hazy remembrance of having experienced impatience when compelled to entertain her in those early days of their acquaintance; it had been only when he grasped that she did not require to be entertained, that she was, even when silent, intensely companionable and sympathetic, that he had begun to take any pleasure in her society. He had believed that only married or middle-aged women could be so unaffectedly agreeable. The majority of girls wanted to be amused, were obviously athirst for compliments. The effort to talk down to the frivolous level of feminine intelligence had always bored him. He recognised no sensible reason for it. That his own sex was responsible for this state of things never occurred to him. Girls adapt themselves with extraordinary ease to the rôle which seems to be expected of them. Beatrice, representing the more evolved type of woman, appealed to Hurst strongly. He did not realise why she appealed to him; he only knew that apart from admiring her he enjoyed being with her.

"I've thought a lot about you," he said unexpectedly, "since our talk the other night. . . . But I expect you've forgotten all that."

"I've a better memory than you give me credit for," she answered.

"I talked a lot of rot," he said, glancing at her swiftly to mark the effect of his words. "I'm sure I

must have bored you. I came to-day in the hope of effacing a bad impression, and I'm afraid I've begun by creating fresh ones. It suggests a kink in the nature of a man when he doesn't love his kind."

"It suggests to me rather a mistaken belief," she replied. "You don't allow yourself to find out whether you love it or no."

He looked her straight in the eyes.

"Please introduce me to the most lovable person beside yourself in the room," he said, "and I will experiment."

She conducted him forthwith to the corner where Ellie Enfield sat with Charlie, and, to the latter's amazed indignation, claimed his help in dispensing tea.

"They've all had tea," he expostulated, as he followed her across the room. "It isn't playing the game, Bee. I suppose it's attributable to your gender that you can't see another girl enjoying herself without wanting to spoil sport."

"Was Ellie enjoying herself?" she asked innocently. Charlie grinned.

"She would rather talk to me than to that fellow anyway," he said confidently. "I was proposing to her at the moment of your inopportune arrival——"

"Proposing!" Beatrice scoffed. "You! I wonder how many times you have asked her to marry you?"

"If you weren't so fond of jumping in on an unfinished sentence you would have realised that my proposal had nothing to do with matrimony," he returned airily. "Your insistence on a single application of a

term which has a wide significance is distinctly feminine. I was proposing that she should invite me to lunch with them to-morrow. I'll have to return to her presently for her answer."

III

THE oddest thing in life, perhaps the most inexplicable and unaccountable, certainly the most irrelevant, is the emotion which is described as passionate love. Some people affect to disapprove of the word passion; but love without passion, however beautiful in itself, is a sexless quality, a quality which in essence is nothing beyond itself, which leads nowhere. Without passion the world might very well come to a finish, and plainly that is inconsistent with the scheme of creation.

It is impossible to state precisely what constitutes the attraction between two persons meeting casually, as dozens of persons meet without feeling any special interest in one another. Suddenly from out the crowd one person stands forth in the eyes of another, and the rest form into a background, an unimportant but essential setting, throwing into stronger relief the vital characteristics of the principal. The person who has once taken the centre of the stage can never again merge with the crowd.

For Beatrice, Frederick Hurst stood out from the rest, a significant, dominant figure—a figure which filled the spaces in her orderly mind and directed all her waking thoughts towards itself. There was created in her a restless longing for his presence, which their brief meetings left unsatisfied. What she found

in Hurst to attract her so intensely she never attempted to explain—could not have explained had she tried to; but she had no doubt at all in her mind that she wanted him, wanted to marry him,—to give herself to him, all that was best in herself,—to have him beside her always in the intimate satisfying relations of ordinary daily life. But, though it was plain to her that Hurst was beginning to care for her, she was vaguely conscious of a growing reluctance on his part towards yielding to this attraction. He was fighting against the domination of an overmastering passion, fighting half-heartedly, avoiding temptation one day with inflexible determination, and the next capitulating feebly, putting himself voluntarily in the way of temptation once more.

Matters reached a climax during the summer. Hurst made one of a house-boat party, got together for the Henley week. He had known beforehand that Beatrice was to be among the guests, and he had seriously debated the question of joining the party, had decided at first not to do so, and then in a reckless moment had flung aside every consideration but one, and had yielded to that—an unconquerable desire to meet her again.

It was a small party, mainly on account of the limited accommodation; and the hostess had selected her guests with the same regard for harmony which Noah displayed in preparation for his lengthy voyage. She had also hired a number of small boats, and these were moored to the *Stella's* stern, and ran parallel with the bank in an inviting string for the use of the *Stella's* passengers, who, following the rule of

Hobson's choice, took each his boat in succession with a disregard for preference, and rowed away with the day's companion.

Hurst usually contrived—and since she aided him in this, it was not a difficult matter—to secure Beatrice for his partner. At his suggestion she rose earlier than the other women, and was out rowing with him every morning at six. Tanned with the sun and the summer wind, and flushed with exertion, for she insisted generally on using the oars, aglow with simple enjoyment of the present, Beatrice was far lovelier in Hurst's eyes than she had appeared in London amid the more artificial surroundings in which he had known her hitherto. Reclining at his ease in the stern, with the ropes held loosely in his hands, he watched the glad young face and noted its unconscious happiness, noted the quiet content in her eyes as they met his—the ready, responsive smile. And while he watched her he reflected, with rage in his heart, and a quick, shamed disgust at himself, on a certain ugly episode in his life, too recent to be relegated to the background—a sordid story of fascination and gratified vanity, and a weak succumbing to impulses that were not even dominating.

Why, he wondered with a savage sense of impotence, had he been such an egregious fool as to take Edward Ashleigh into his confidence? He had made a muddle of things; there was no doubt about that. And he was adding to the muddle. He was falling in love—blind, passionate love. It was the real thing, this: it wasn't merely admiration for a beautiful face; it was something finer than that—something that

stirred and touched him, and made him desire to be worthier of this girl's unquestioning trust; made him profoundly ashamed of what had formerly appeared to him as rather a creditable adventure, an intrigue with a quality of dash and knight-errantry about it which had contributed a sense of splendid daring to an otherwise sordid affair. He hated it now—hated the memory of it. Always when he looked into Beatrice's eyes the memory returned and haunted him. This morning, while he sat watching her, with the sunlight bathing her warmly and playing tantalisingly in her eyes, it seemed to him that another pair of eyes were reflected in hers, and stared back at him in mocking derision. On the pretext of consulting his watch, he averted his gaze abruptly, and, seeing the time, sat up straighter.

"We shall be late for breakfast," he said. "You'll have to work."

"There will be no breakfast for either of us if you go to sleep over the steering," she returned, bending to the sculls. "We nearly stuck on that sandbank."

"I shouldn't mind if we stuck there all day," he answered. "If you disparage my navigation I'll make for the first sandbank that offers, and fix her firmly in the mud."

"Steer for a good-looking one, then, where we can lie among the bulrushes and muse."

"That's rather a pretty idea," he said. . . . "It only needs the moonlight to be perfect. What would it suggest to you?—all among the rushes, eh?"

"Moses," she answered promptly.

"Moses!" he repeated in disgust.

"Yes. I thought everyone knew about him, and his early association with bulrushes. I suppose it would suggest to you only ham and eggs deferred? I'm not so prosaic."

"No," he retorted. "You are so abnormally sentimental that the average man might hesitate to venture among bulrushes with you."

She laughed softly.

"You can get a chaperon to-morrow, if you feel uneasy," she said.

Abruptly Hurst leaned towards her, a swift unaccountable gleam in his eyes, the blood showing dully beneath the bronze of his skin where it mounted to his temples. The emotion that gripped him was sufficiently powerful to render him indifferent to appearances; he was so intent upon her that he lost sight of the fact that, even at that hour, they had not the river to themselves. The faintly surprised inquiry in Beatrice's eyes acted as a check.

"Look here!" he said. "There's a moon to-night. . . . Will you come with me?—there's a little spot we passed up one of the reaches. There are bulrushes, and the willows hang over the water, and . . . Will you come—after dinner?"

She rowed for a moment in silence and avoided the gaze of his eager eyes. A strange shyness held her. She wanted to agree to his proposal, wanted to stroll beneath the willows with him in the moonlight; but a certain new quality in his voice and manner startled her; she felt, and was at a loss to understand why she should feel it, a little afraid of him.

"You aren't going to refuse?" he said, watching

her closely, reading the indecision in her face, bent on overruling any difficulty that seemed to offer to the hindrance of his arrangement.

She looked at him then swiftly, a little flushed and uncertain still, but obviously yielding. It was evident to her that to refuse to go would disappoint him keenly. Instinctively she realised that the adjustment of their future relations depended on her present decision.

"I'll go—if we can manage it," she said doubtfully.

He smiled confidently.

"That will be all right," he said, and sat back with the air of a man who has achieved his purpose and is thoroughly contented.

Having gained her consent, Hurst did not concern himself with the difficulty of getting her away from the other guests after dinner. He meant to manage it somehow. To do so unobserved was impossible. In the evenings the *Stella's* party assembled on deck, and each guest was expected to contribute to the entertainment of the rest. The day being devoted to boating, everyone was sufficiently tired after dinner to prefer to remain on board; and the little line of boats trailing from the *Stella's* stern was seldom requisitioned after sunset. Therefore that evening when Hurst began hauling in one of the boats, his action elicited comment.

"What's the fellow after?" a man standing beside her asked Beatrice.

Beatrice was leaning with her elbows on the rail, looking down at the mirrored reflection of starlit sky in the river beneath. The question, seeming to her

to suggest that the speaker somehow connected Hurst's occupation with herself, caused her some embarrassment. She looked round slowly, and, with her gaze on the tall figure in the boat, answered:

"We are going for a pull. There are parts of the river we have a fancy to see by moonlight."

"Oh!" he said, and smiled comprehendingly. "I should never have suspected Hurst of being poetical."

"Why not attribute the poetry to me? There is nothing which appeals to me more powerfully than the effect of moonlight on water."

"You get that from here," he said.

"For that matter," she replied, "one can get it in a puddle, or a bucket of water even. I'm in search of contrasts. There are reaches—unsuspected backwaters, and tiny creeks, where the moonlight filters through the trees and shows between the rushes, leaving patches of unrelieved blackness. I haven't seen it. I am going to see it to-night. I know it is all as I picture it. One finds those shadowed places on the brightest days."

"I'd enjoy the sound of that better," he remarked, "if it were myself you were proposing to go with. There is a quality in moonlight that is heady. You've been imbibing it."

She laughed.

"Ah! my head will stand the test all right," she answered; "it's entirely well balanced."

They moved aft as Hurst brought the boat alongside. Her companion helped her step into it, and remained looking down on them while Beatrice seated

herself in the stern, and Hurst shipped the sculls and pushed off.

"I don't call it altogether fair, old man," he called to Hurst reproachfully. "You are robbing the company of its chief vocalist. Selfishness is detestable."

"You have a chance of practising an opposite virtue," Hurst retorted, and pulled away from the *Stella* with long, swinging strokes.

"The best-looking girl on board," the other murmured complainingly, and turned to face his hostess, who joined him and stood watching with him the little boat gliding swiftly away over the moonlit waters, the lantern at her bows swinging gaily and reflecting warmly on the ripples which the boat made in her passage.

"I hate monopolists," he said.

"In that case," she returned soothingly, "you don't envy either of them; they're both monopolists."

"Oh! as for that," he replied, "I daresay Miss Ashleigh would be agreeable to an exchange of escort."

"I confess I haven't detected any dissatisfaction on her part with the present escort," she said. "I don't think I ever saw two people more unaffectedly pleased with one another. Don't you like to see people enjoying themselves?"

"Yes," he answered—"when I happen to be of the number."

"And aren't you?" she asked.

He smiled engagingly.

"Under existing conditions, yes," he replied, and turned and walked with her along the lighted deck.

"It wasn't so difficult to manage, you see," Hurst

said when, well away from the *Stella*, he slackened the pace on the boat, and, pulling a leisurely stroke, found time to study the dim outline of his companion's face, and the sheen of the moonlight on the bright, uncovered hair.

"No," she answered, feeling pleased and shy together at the novelty of this moonlight row, with its suggestion of intimacy and separation from the world, its adventurous flavour of flitting and evasion that added the distinctive touch of the unusual and the romantic, and so made this row unlike any other they had enjoyed together, surpassing these altogether in the matter of pleasurable excitement.

"Confess, now, you are glad you came?" he said.

She smiled back at him, resting comfortably among the cushions, feeling so entirely happy that she could not disguise the note of complete satisfaction in her voice.

"It's the best time of all for the river," she replied. "I never knew that anything could be half so good as this."

"You wait," he said, "until we get away from these other boats. I know a spot. . . . We'll have it to ourselves . . ."

"With bulrushes?" she asked.

"Bulrushes, yes," he answered—"and solitude . . . no sound to disturb the silence, save the music of the wind, and the sweep of the tide among the reeds . . ."

IV

NOW," said Hurst, as the little boat nosed her way between the tall reeds fringing the bank where the willows grew densely and overhung the water, "how's this? Does it suggest Moses to you here?"

Beatrice sat forward, one elbow resting on her knee, her chin supported in her hand, surveying the scene with dreamy eyes that noted the quiet beauty of the shadowed water on which patches of moonlight reflected whitely through the massed foliage of the trees. The only sounds which broke the stillness were the soft rustle of the leaves as the night breeze stirred them in its passage, and the lazy push of the river among the reeds.

"Yes," she said, and was silent a moment. "It takes me right back," she added presently, "to those bygone ages. I see the moon shining on the Nile and the Red Sea, and dark-eyed Israelite women coming down to the water——"

"To hide their kids among the bulrushes," he put in flippantly.

"Ah!" she said. "Don't spoil it. It's too good for jesting. Listen!"

She held up a hand for silence, while softly across the water floated the sound of a guitar, played by an unseen hand far off, and growing ever fainter as

the player was borne onward, away from this quiet retreat which the sweep of the willows hid.

"With a stretch of the imagination," Hurst said, "one might add to your picture the suggestive touch of the timbrel. I prefer my music."

"Your music?" she said.

"Yes . . . the low song of the tide in its reluctant turning, and the careless rustling of the summer wind. Do you hear it? . . . just a protesting murmur . . . an echo?"

"Many echoes," she breathed softly, and leaned over the side of the boat and looked long at the moving water.

"Many echoes," he repeated, with an inflection in his tones that sounded a note of regret—"but few voices."

She turned her face deliberately towards him, a grave intentness in her eyes.

"That's a quotation?" she said. "I seem to know it."

"Who doesn't?" he returned. "It's Goethe's: 'There are many echoes, but few voices.' And the majority of us spend our lives in listening to the echoes."

Beatrice stirred restlessly. It was strange how his words gripped her. His earnest mood, so unusual with him that it seemed to reveal an altogether new and unsuspected quality in this man who had appeared to her as somewhat insincere heretofore, appealed to a corresponding earnestness in herself, called forth a swift, responsive sympathy. She realised instinctively that he classed himself with the majority, that he knew himself to have disregarded the voices, to have

been satisfied with the echoes, to be one of those for whom the voices do not speak. It troubled her that this should be, that he should be content to have it so.

"I want to hear the voices," she said.

"Yes," he answered. "Quite possibly you will hear them. You are not likely to mistake an echo for the real thing."

Abruptly he stood up, and, catching at a bough, pulled the boat into the bank and sprang ashore.

"Come," he said, and held a hand to her and helped her to land. "We are going to walk in the moonlight—all alone, with nothing to disturb us but the echoes. Who cares if the boat drifts away?"

Nevertheless he made it fast before turning to her and offering her his hand again. Unhesitatingly Beatrice put her hand in his, and walked beside him in the warm stillness of the summer night.

"If only this could last!" he said. "That's a regret that somehow gets into everything—spoils everything. The pleasant moments are always the fleetest."

"I don't want you to talk like that," Beatrice said. "I want to enjoy this—absolutely. Don't mar a perfect hour with regrets, Captain Hurst."

"Is it a perfect hour—for you?" he asked, turning to her quickly. "I scarcely dared to hope . . ."

Moved by a sudden thought he broke off, and, clasping her hand more firmly, said a little abruptly:

"Look here! Let's cut the ground a bit, and take the short road to intimacy. My name is Fred. May I call you Beatrice?"

"If you wish—yes," she answered, and felt glad that he should suggest the use of Christian names.

It seemed, as the clasp of his hand seemed, to draw them closer in the charmed solitude of the night, as their lingering footsteps trod the grassy path, unheeding where they wandered, so that they were together and alone.

She wondered a little sadly whether this walk meant quite as much to Hurst as it meant to her. Always it appeared to her that when they advanced some way along the pleasant road of friendship, Hurst turned deliberately and retraced his steps ever to the starting-point. Would they, after that night, find themselves back at the first stage again in the morning? And then his voice broke in upon her musing and put to flight her doubts of him.

"It's awfully sweet of you, Beatrice, to be so kind to me," he said, and never had she heard him speak before in tones so diffident and grateful. "I've been an awful rotter. I wonder if you knew what a worthless fool I am whether you'd bother about me? Often when I am not with you I resolve never to see you again; and then . . . I imagine I never kept a resolve that was worth anything. It's always the impulse of the moment, the gratifying of my own pleasure, that wins. You are just the sweetest influence that has come into my life. . . . You are the voice I have missed in listening to the echoes. What is to happen when one hears a voice too late?"

"Is it ever too late?" Beatrice asked.

"I'm afraid so, sometimes," he said, and was silent.

Beatrice walked on, her face turned from him, looking towards the river which lay white and still in the moonlight beyond the trees, a broad band of silver

under the clear sky. She felt immeasurably troubled, perplexed, and uncomprehending; and her heart rebelled against his acquiescence in inevitabilities which he did not name.

"I don't understand," she said.

"I don't wish you to understand," he answered, and added, almost roughly, "What I've got, I'll keep. We'll have this hour anyway. I'm not going to spoil it. It was your mention of echoes that set me in this direction. Bother the echoes! Who heeds them? I'm hearing the voice to-night. I'll hear it always, I expect, after this—the voice, and the murmur of the river. . . ."

Presently he said, looking at her half-averted face, and speaking gently, as one speaks when conscious of, and sorry for, having given needless pain:

"I've vexed you. . . . Forgive me. I'm a blundering fool. I talk like a fool at times. Forget what I have said."

"You ask impossibilities," she answered quietly. "And you are not fair to me. It will be time enough for you to tell me things when you can give me your full confidence."

"Eh?" he said, oddly disconcerted.

He pulled her to him, and, still keeping his hold on her hand, placed his other hand on her shoulder and held her firmly. She did not resist. She stood quite still beneath his touch and looked steadily into his eyes. If he had not guessed it before, he knew at that moment that he had only to ask to have. And he could not ask—not yet.

"You expressed the wish to have this hour un-

spoilt," he said. "Let's keep to that. I don't want to discuss gloomy things—it strikes a discordant note. I brought you here to enjoy the beauty of the night. I wanted you—away from those others. Let us forget everything—everyone—just for this one night, and think only of each other. When we are back in the world it will be something for me to remember, this."

He stooped until his face was close to her own, and smiled gravely into her eyes.

"Seal our compact of friendship," he pleaded. "I so want to kiss your lips."

She drew back, startled by this request which, it occurred to her, should not have been made at the present indefinite stage in their relationship. A touch of prudery, born of girlish pride and shyness, caused her to shrink from the proffered caress.

"Don't!" she said, a little brusquely. "I don't want you to flirt with me."

He straightened himself abruptly, and released her, stung by her words more than by her refusal of his request. Flirting was the last thing in the world to have entered his thoughts at the moment.

"You mistake me," he said, with some earnestness. "No such intention was in my mind. I am sorry to have annoyed you. Don't fear that I shall offend again."

Beatrice walked on slowly, silently, conscious of the strain between them which marred the easy frankness that had marked their intercourse hitherto, making it so keenly enjoyable to both. She was conscious also of a faint regret. Why not have given him the kiss he asked for? It was not so great a thing to

give when love went with the gift. And yet, was not that the reason why she had withheld it? Love hesitates to surrender to an inadequate return.

And then she heard him speaking again at her side in a tone of forced lightness that grated by reason of its insincerity.

"There isn't so much in a kiss, after all," he said, and the next moment felt savage with himself for allowing his irritation to goad him to such a remark.

He guessed by her continued silence, by the sudden quickening of her step, that she was displeased; and a strong desire leaped in him to undo the bad impression he had created, to come to a better understanding, to see her turn to him once more with the old kind look in her eyes—the shy, sweet smile that made him always hunger to kiss the lips that had refused him their caress.

"Beatrice," he said, speaking jerkily, and with a strange hoarseness in his voice that conveyed to her listening ears something of the depths of the emotion that stirred him, "don't be angry with me. I need your kindness more than you can guess. There are things I can't tell you yet—difficulties. . . . I've been a fool, and I'm paying for it—paying heavily. Some day I'll tell you. Perhaps you'll understand, and pity me, and be kind. . . . But I want something from you now. I've grown to care. . . . You must see that I care. I ought not to tell you these things; but I can't let you carry away a wrong impression. Say that you are not angry with me. I'm a blundering idiot. . . . But there is one thing I can't face—the loss of your friendship. You won't take that from me, will you?"

He put out a tentative hand.

"Beatrice," he said . . . "Beatrice. . . ."

She looked at him very intently, not moving, obviously uncertain what to do. Then she took the hand he offered without speaking; and he lifted hers, clasped in his own, and touched it with his lips.

"There is everything in a kiss," he murmured, smiling at her while he did so. "You knew that. You knew that I would never ask from you something that carried no meaning."

"Ah!" she said, and smiled back at him, the old kind smile. "I wish you would be quite sincere with me always. I think I have a right to demand that. I don't ask anything else."

He drew her hand through his arm and started to walk again.

"You're a lover of truth," he said, assuming a lighter manner. "So am I; but it isn't always practicable. You are the honestest person I have ever met. I like that in you, although it inclines to hurt at times. I've a bruise—several, in fact."

"You'll get over them," she answered.

She wondered whether he realised how often she felt bruised. She was feeling bruised at the moment; and the hurt grew instead of lessening. The knowledge that Hurst was taking all that she had to give, that he seemed bent on winning her love, and at the same time was anxious to impress her with a sense of its hopelessness, wounded her deeply. She could not guess even at the nature of the difficulties he spoke of; but that they were very real to him she gathered

from the bitter way in which he alluded to these vague distresses which somehow shadowed his life.

He had said he cared for her. This was no empty phrase. She knew that he cared, as certainly as she knew that she loved him, would love him always, even though the difficulties which he did not name should separate them finally. Whatever the difficulties were, though they might influence their actions, they could not govern their affections. With no great effort on his part he had won her love; once given, it was beyond her power to recall, just as it was beyond her comprehension to understand what it was in him she loved, what particular quality in him drew her as inevitably as the magnet attracts steel and holds it. It was a thing altogether outside her volition and her control.

"After to-morrow," Hurst said, breaking a long silence, "all this will be a memory. Shall you think of this night, Beatrice?—of this walk? Will the music of the river penetrate your dreams? . . . Don't answer. I want to believe that you'll remember. I shall. When I close my eyes I'll see a picture of it all—the silver of the river, and the black shadows of the trees across our path—and the moonlight shining on your dear face and hair."

He looked down into the upturned face, lifted to his in the cold white light, and noted the wistful questioning, the wonder in the beautiful eyes.

"You'll remember?" he said.

"I shall remember," she answered—"yes."

V

WHEN later they rowed back to the *Stella*, Beatrice, as she sat wrapped for the greater part of the time in silence, depressed and manifestly tired, was conscious of a sense of finality that appeared to close all the vistas of life, leaving no outlook. It seemed to her that that night they had reached the furthest point in their relationship, that, like explorers following a difficult trail, they had touched the limit of possibilities so far as these affected themselves, and were forced to retrace their steps, leaving the unknown places unexplored for the more fortunate to discover.

The consciousness of failure and disappointment oppressed her, and faint stirrings of resentment and impatience warred with her love, and set her thinking of Hurst in an altered light—questioning his attitude, pondering over the unrevealed things in his life which thrust so insistently between them. And underlying all was the conviction that he had acted selfishly in troubling her peace if the difficulties to which he referred so vaguely were too great to be overcome.

There was a suggestion of weariness in her look and manner when, having gained the *Stella's* side, she was assisted on board by the man who had helped her into the boat and expostulated at her going. She stood for a moment to glance back over her shoulder

at Hurst, standing straight and motionless in the boat which she had set rocking gently in stepping from it on to the little gangway. He was looking after her with an earnest intensity in his dark eyes, the set of his lips compressed into hard, inflexible lines.

"Been solving the great problem of life together?" the man at her side asked cynically.

Beatrice turned to regard him, with a faint uplifting of her brows.

"What is that?" she inquired.

"Whether life is worth the living."

"Oh!" She emitted a short laugh. "I don't think I ever had any doubts about that."

"No! I have at times—not just at the moment, anyhow. Does the moon look any different viewed higher up?"

Quickly she repressed a feeling of irritation, and answered lightly:

"You should go and see for yourself. It was all just as I had pictured it—more beautiful, indeed."

"Yes! Well, come and sit over here and get my view of it; and I'll undertake to prove to you that it is quite as fine from this point. Appreciation depends more on circumstances than environment. I admit that the circumstances"—he indicated by a gesture the little group gathered on the *Stella's* deck—"are somewhat over-assertive; but one can turn one's back on that part of it."

Beatrice was not disinclined to turn her back, to sit quiet, apart from the rest, lending an inattentive ear to her companion's amiable nonsense. She felt relieved, when Hurst came up and joined the others,

that she was not among them; she was in no mood for social amenities, and she was glad to be spared the necessity of having to meet his gaze, of having to dissemble before this light-hearted assembly in order to disguise the weariness and the despondency which her present companion, if he noticed it, good-naturedly ignored.

But to remain outside the circle for long was impossible. Mrs. Pratt Ridgeway, with a view to making the last night on the river a success, organised games, and insisted on everyone joining in; so that the last impressions Beatrice was to carry away of that evening consisted of a confusion of hilarity and noise and affected gaiety, before which the regret and the heart-hunger shrank into a pained repression, to find an outlet later when the careless gaiety ended and the hush of night settled upon the river.

The following morning it rained. When she opened her eyes upon the grey mist, Beatrice viewed the falling drops with immense relief. She had not intended to go boating with Hurst before breakfast; she had not told him of her decision; she did not know whether, had it been fine, he would have expected her, but she felt grateful to the weather for having spared her the necessity of seeming to decline to go. She did not wish him to suspect how deeply she was hurt.

They met at breakfast with an affectation of careless friendliness, and exchanged insincere regrets on the unfavourable conditions of the weather.

"Rotten luck," Hurst said, "to have the last morning spoilt by weeping skies. It might have held up a

few hours longer. I turned out at the usual hour, although I saw it was hopeless."

"It isn't fair to grumble," she answered. "The weather has been ideal on the whole."

"Yes," he agreed. He regarded her for a moment attentively. "You are going home with a most glorious tan. The sun has kissed you."

"I've a freckle on my nose," she returned, smiling. "That rather distresses me."

He examined the blemish critically.

"I like it," he asserted, and looked her in the eyes, hesitated, and then laughed with a faint constraint. "It's a souvenir," he said. "And it will fade away with the memory of this week. Where are you going after this?"

"Into Cornwall," she answered—"Fowey—with my father. It won't be exactly festive. He fishes all day, and I bait the lines. It is an unemotional form of amusement which suits us both, however. I am only unhappy when he catches fish. He doesn't do it often."

"Well," said Hurst, and paused reflectively, "Cornwall isn't so very far . . ."

He was looking at her, and he caught the gleam of hope that shone in her eyes, and broke off a little abruptly, leaving his sentence uncompleted.

That was the last he saw of her alone, save for a minute or so at the station, where he saw her off with other members of the party who were going back by train. And those last few minutes were marred by a strange awkwardness on his part, which manifested itself chiefly in a too obvious attempt to appear

unconcerned, and to ignore the intimacy of the past few days.

Beatrice took her seat in the train with a feeling of relief. She was glad when it moved out of the station, and the dark, handsome, reckless face which she loved too well, vanished with the other faces on the platform and was lost in the drizzle and the mist as she was borne rapidly away. She did not move from her corner, did not get up for a last look from the window; and Hurst, who waited in the expectation of catching a final glimpse of her, turned when the train vanished and walked away disappointed. The greyness of the day hung like a blight over everything: nothing of the glow and the glamour of the past week remained—only the grey and the chill of the rain-veiled landscape, and the dull patter of the heavy drops falling on the asphalt. A fitting finish to a dream that ought never to have been dreamed.

Beatrice was going back to town for the purpose of joining her father, who had remained in London, despite the heat, for reasons which he did not explain to his daughter, who, while she enjoyed as much of his confidence as anyone, knew very little about his affairs. She was very unpleasantly struck with his appearance when she saw him. He looked ill, and seemed to have aged unaccountably during the short time that she had been away. He attributed this to the weather, and brushed her anxious inquiries aside, showing irritation when she made any reference to his health.

During dinner, at which meal Edward Ashleigh was present, Beatrice, observing her father with a

greater attentiveness than usual, noticed his lack of appetite, which showed itself less in a disinclination for food than a physical inability to swallow. While making a pretence of eating, he endeavoured to show some interest in her doings, questioning her about her week on the river, and receiving her replies with a wandering attention which surprised and distressed her.

At the finish of the meal he went to his study, and the brother and sister were left alone. Charlie was staying at the Enfields' place in Berkshire, and Edward was leaving town on the morrow. He had run up on receipt of a message from his father, and had waited only for his sister's return. He was, Beatrice realised, considerably worried. She could not determine whether this arose from anxiety on their father's account, or from other reasons. He was reticent in manner, and obviously desirous of allaying her fears.

"The governor's out of sorts," he said. "It is a good thing you are off to the sea so soon. He is nervous about himself, poor old chap! Sent for me in a hurry the other day. Business worries, I fancy; but he doesn't open out. Talked a little about investments, and then shut up like an oyster. You must keep an eye on him, Bee, and not let him overdo it. He had a bit of a seizure . . . it was very slight, whatever it was. He thinks it was a seizure, but he is quite likely to be mistaken."

"Didn't he see Doctor Fuller?" Beatrice asked, lifting startled eyes to his face.

He stroked his small moustache, and tried to look unconcerned.

"Oh, yes—the next day. He prescribed rest, which the governor doesn't take, and physic, which I believe he does. But the sea air will do him more good than anything else. It's possibly only the heat. Don't alarm yourself needlessly. He'll be all right in a week or so."

She shook her head.

"He looks very ill, Teddy," she said.

He had no answer to that, and so remained silent; and Beatrice sat silent too, trying hard to view the matter lightly as he advised, and feeling none the less a chill presentiment of coming calamity. She was in the humour to see the black side of things.

"You are as brown as a gipsy," her brother remarked presently, surveying with a certain disapproval the tan which concealed the unnatural pallor of her cheeks.

She became aware of the criticism in his eyes and flushed warmly and averted her gaze.

"It's the wind and the sun," she said.

"You've been living in the open—yes. Boating hard all the time, I suppose? See much of Hurst?"

"Yes," she answered, and found it impossible to add anything to the bald admission.

There followed an immense, significant silence. Beatrice felt, without understanding why, that Edward was annoyed. There was tension in the atmosphere, a sense of something impending that held her rigid, waiting in confused expectancy for his next remark. It came after an almost intolerable pause.

"I consider it was indecent of Hurst to go," he said. She glanced up quickly.

"Why 'indecent'?" she asked, catching at the offensive term.

He beat the carpet impatiently with his foot, and then got up and walked to the hearthrug, where he stood for a second with his back to her, and then faced deliberately round.

"He's—entangled," he said, and frowned, and examined his finger nails with a close attentiveness which seemed to point to a desire to avoid her gaze. "I wouldn't have told you if he'd played the game," he added, with a touch of bitterness, as though he felt it necessary, and at the same time difficult, to excuse this betrayal of a confidence. "He's entangled with a married woman. He nearly made a mess of things in India, and then had the luck to go down with fever and get sent home. The fool of a woman followed him, unfortunately. She's in England now."

Beatrice felt the blood in her veins turning to ice as she listened. This, then—this sordid tale of dishonour—was the difficulty at which he had hinted, the something he could not tell her, which he had promised one day to disclose in the belief that she would understand and pity him and—he had not said it, but his manner had conveyed the hope—condone. She did not feel pity for him at the moment; she was sensible only of a slowly kindling anger, a keen disgust. Her face hardened.

"You ought never to have brought a man of that character to the house," she said.

He reddened, and for a space found no answer. Then he said jerkily:

"You didn't seem to spare him a thought. . . . And he isn't altogether to blame. A woman like that"

"He cares for her, I suppose?" she said.

"Oh, I don't know! It was another case of the cruel husband, and Hurst had a fancy to act comforter. She's an attractive-looking woman, and rather a sporting sort, and he was flattered with her preference. He's sick to death of it now, of course."

He took his cigarette-case from his pocket, and made an elaborate business of selecting and lighting a cigarette, while Beatrice, feeling numbed and chill, watched him with wide expressionless eyes. Presently she said:

"I wonder why you told me."

He fidgeted with his cigarette, taking it from his mouth and then thrusting it again between his lips with a hardly restrained impatience. He felt oddly irritated with her for pursuing the subject. She had the facts. He felt that she would have displayed better taste in allowing the matter to drop.

"You've been seeing a lot of Hurst lately. I didn't wish you to get too friendly," he said. "He ought to have kept away."

"Yes," she answered, and was painfully aware of the tremor in her voice which she could not altogether control. "In the circumstances, I agree with you; he ought to have kept away."

She thought of Hurst's words, uttered only that morning—words which had given her such pleasure

at the time, "Cornwall isn't so very far . . ." and the fear that he might seek her out there caused her to add:

"I think it will be well if you advise him to keep away in future."

And without waiting for any response she rose and quitted the room. The dream was fading for her too—going the way of dreams, leaving only the blurred, bewildering impression of unsubstantial things.

VI

IT was in its way a fortunate circumstance for Beatrice that her father's condition called for so much watchfulness and attention that, in her anxiety on his account, her own troubles dwindled proportionately and no longer usurped the principal place in her thoughts.

The greatest difficulty in his case was to induce him to take food; he went for the greater part of a month in a state of semi-starvation, had a nasty turn in the boat one day, and then unaccountably began to mend. The sea air and the rest helped materially towards his improvement; and to Beatrice's satisfaction he decided to remain in Fowey until the end of the summer.

"It will be dull for you. Do you mind?" he asked.

"I don't find it dull," she answered—"now you are getting well. I like it here."

He looked at her with a strange wistfulness in his eyes, and made no response. But two days later Charlie came down for a week; and Beatrice strongly suspected that her father had suggested his visit with a view to making things brighter for her. She never asked the question. On the whole, she was pleased to see her brother. His airy gaiety, despite a broken heart about which he was cheerfully insistent, was infectious; an atmosphere of careless, arrogant, good-

humoured youthfulness clung to Charlie, and invaded, and generally routed, any opposing humours.

On the present occasion he was so charged with exasperation at the announcement of Ellie Enfield's engagement, a disaster that was only a few days old, that he confined himself when alone with Beatrice to the expression of extravagant regrets, and the denunciation of the middle-aged fiancé.

"She doesn't care that much for him," he declared, and flicked a contemptuous finger.

"Did she tell you so?" inquired Beatrice.

"Of course she did. Ellie's awfully fond of me. She'd have waited for me—years, if they'd let her. Arkwright is beastly rich—and he's *bald*."

"Well, you can do the waiting," Beatrice returned soothingly. "By the time you are beastly rich Ellie may be a widow."

"Not she. Arkwright will take good care of that. He's as strong as an ox. If Ellie had any spirit she'd elope with me."

"Have you suggested it to her?"

Charlie looked a trifle sheepish.

"My good Bee, you want to know too much," he said, and turned from staring out of the window to regard his sister, who remained in her seat at the breakfast-table, idly crumbling a piece of bread on her plate. "Look here! Let's go for a walk," he said.

She made no immediate response to this, but continued playing with the breadcrumbs with inconsequent fingers and an inattentive face. He scrutinised her for a moment in silence.

"Do you know," he then said, with disconcerting suddenness, "you are growing slow?"

Beatrice lifted her glance swiftly and flushed.

"You haven't said a single smart thing since I arrived," he complained. "You aren't even a good listener. What's up?"

"I don't know," she answered, and deliberated awhile. "I am afraid I am losing my vitality," she said, as an outcome of this reflection.

"Rot!" he ejaculated. "It's not like you to be affected. You've been in too close attendance on the governor; the worry has got upon your nerves. I've half a mind to take you to church by way of contrast. You want bracing morally."

She laughed.

"All right. I don't mind. I haven't been inside a church since I left college."

"Well, I'm not confident enough to bet," he replied, "that I can find my place in the church service. But it really doesn't matter much."

By a strange chance it transpired that at the church they attended the plain young curate whom Beatrice had loved in her college days was taking duty, and, to her intense satisfaction, he preached the morning sermon. He was vicar now, and had altered a little in appearance, had filled out and matured and lost the hesitating diffidence of manner which had once commended itself to her because of its suggestion of pleasing modesty. But the weak eyes and weaker chin were still distinctive features; and the flabby sallowness of his skin remained, unhealthy and anæmic as of yore. His sermon was of the trite conventional

order; it conveyed, to one listener at least, nothing new, nothing stirring, or inspiring, or particularly hopeful; it revealed however a conscientious industry in the construction of sentences, and the choice of vague and high-sounding phrases. The selection of words, rather than a grip on ideas, seemed of paramount importance.

"Bit on the dull side, that chap," Charlie commented, as they passed out into the sunshine again with the rest of the sparse congregation. He glanced at Beatrice's smiling face, detected the laugh in her eyes, and showed his amaze.

"Upon my soul! I believe that form of entertainment suits you," he said. "You are of the stuff that makes a parish worker, and a struggling curate's wife. What ironic fate set you down among atheistical surroundings, I wonder? You will be leaving us one day, my good Beatrice, to join the Brass Band—or whatever it is they call the female contingent that, out of love for the service or the cloth, cleans the brasses in the churches. We shall hear of you yet as a shining light at missionary and temperance meetings, and the star of some pale young curate's home."

"I would have been the star of that particular curate's home, if he had done me the honour to ask me," she said, and recounted that early romance for his edification.

Charlie chuckled.

"Prudent man!" he observed. "I guess he had a let off."

"I am not sure," Beatrice retorted, "that it is not rather I who deserve your congratulations. The odd

fancies girls have! I believe it was his unhealthiness I liked. It made me feel motherly. I have an idea that was his wife who sat in front of us—the woman with the peevish face and the generally worried look. Probably she found his sickliness interesting until she had to live with it. Familiarity does not stimulate the sympathies.”

“You are jealous, Bee; your bitterness proves it. Sounds as though you have hankerings for your mealy-faced pastor still. You ought to have been the daughter of our reverend uncle. I think I should have liked you as a cousin—even as a disapproving cousin, with an invisible nimbus and an air of pious reproof. I’d have let you try your hand at reforming me. Funny one doesn’t feel that way with one’s sister.”

“You goose!” she returned, amused. “There is nothing in you needs reforming. You are as harmless as you are absurd.”

“Mrs. Enfield says that—or something very like it,” he replied in a discontented voice, as though in his opinion a reputation for worth was an offence. “She will never be able to say it of Arkwright, anyway. He’s lived his life all right.”

“Someone else is bitter now,” said Beatrice. “Is that a proof of jealousy in you?”

“Jealous! . . . of Arkwright? Not much. I’d like to shoot the blighter. Pistols for two and coffee for one in the good old style—if I were sure I should drink the coffee, that is. I shouldn’t care to snuff out before I’ve had my innings.”

"No," she replied. "Sentiment would be fairly costly at that price."

"Well, there isn't much sentiment about you," her brother declared, "or you wouldn't discuss your anæmic love affair in the bloodless way in which you do."

"Isn't it a fitting way of discussing an anæmic affair?" she asked.

Charlie grinned.

"I suppose it might be. Personally I have no experience of anæmic affairs; mine are hot-blooded. I go about in a state of quotation—you know the lines—who was the chap who wrote them, by the way?—' 'Twere better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.' I consider that very illuminating—though I'm hanged if I know what it illuminates. But it fits, somehow. However, after Ellie's married I'm going to see if I can't recover some of the loss. She says afterwards we can be the best of chums. I daresay we shall be."

"I fancy that rôle will suit you better than the other," Beatrice answered. "And I can't imagine even Mr. Arkwright objecting."

"There is something in having a reputation for being a white-haired boy, after all," Charlie replied cheerfully. "I don't know how I earned it, but I am beginning to reckon it an asset. I wonder what you all would have said if Ellie had crossed the Channel with me. There's time yet; she doesn't tie the knot until the spring."

"Ellie is too much her mother's daughter to do anything so utterly foolish," Beatrice asserted. "And I

doubt whether you could find the passage money even."

"The beastly money again!" he ejaculated, in a tone of disgust. "The currency slime is over everything—except me," he added, and broke into an airy laugh. "There's no guilt on this gingerbread, worse luck!"

The money shortage was ever a serious question with Charlie. He received a fairly generous allowance from his father; but he never by any chance came out on it. However, appeals to the fountain-head usually met with a satisfactory response. He had come down now with the intention of putting forward a further appeal, and he entertained not the slightest doubt that he would obtain what he wanted. The first intimation of the limit of his father's patience came as a shock when later he preferred his request and met with a refusal. It was such a surprise to him that it left him with nothing to say; he could not even urge the pressing nature of his need in face of that point-blank denial, which, by reason of its unprecedented character, carried the conviction of an unalterable decision. Mr. Ashleigh gave no explanation of his refusal, other than that conveyed in his brief homily.

"A wise man lives within his means," he observed, "however small these may be; he has no right to look for benefits save those he earns for himself. Self-denial is self-discipline—practise it. I have not," he added, after a slight pause, surveying his son's crest-fallen mien, "adhered strictly to this principle myself. I am regretting that now. In your case it will be

well to remember that self-dependence is the keynote of happiness and success."

Which was all very well in its way, Charlie opined, but was no help in the present strait. The advice would have been more acceptable had it been accompanied by a correspondingly elegant cheque. It was easy to assume the rôle of rhetorical moralist when one was not financially embarrassed.

"Curtail your expenditure until your debts are settled."

That too sounded simple. But simple expedients are so beastly inconvenient.

Charlie's debts were in no wise considerable; but the necessity for economy irked him, and the knowledge that he could no longer spend money with an optimistic belief in a never-failing source of supply worried him far more than any number of debts could have. All his pleasant illusions were fading away into nothingness. This was the second ugly surprise to overtake him in a week, and it was, though he would not have admitted it, more of a facer than the first.

"I am considering chucking everything in favour of posing for the kinema," he confided to Beatrice. "Pots of money are made that way."

"Quite possibly," she returned, without enthusiasm. "The meanest use of one's talents is best appreciated by the majority. But yours is rather a sordid ambition, Charlie. What do you want with pots of money?"

"To have a good time, of course," he replied. "Money isn't of any use except for what it brings. And I don't see that ambition is much use either. It's

merely a form of vanity—an attempt to outdistance the rest. I want to have a right good time while I'm young, and peg out comfortably before I'm too old to enjoy life."

"That's just selfishness," she said. "And it doesn't work. Lots of people have tried it. One can't live simply for one's self."

"I don't see why one can't," he contended.

"One can't because no one is an entirety; we are insignificant parts of a huge machinery. We've got to do our part whether we want to or no. There isn't any getting away from it."

"I don't recognise any logical argument in that against having a good time," he insisted.

"No. Only when we are out for enjoyment someone blunders across our path and—spoils things."

VII

MR. ASHLEIGH was so far recovered by the time they returned to town that Beatrice's anxiety on his account was allayed. She ceased to regard him as an invalid. Although he was increasingly nervous about his health, he contrived to hide this from his daughter, and he encouraged her in the belief that he was as strong as before the attack, which he realised was more serious than the doctor allowed. Another such attack, he believed, would be the finish. He lived with this dread troubling him daily; yet Beatrice, who was with him constantly, never suspected it. He appeared to her unchanged in any respect, save that he looked older and more enfeebled. But he had never been particularly robust, and he was no longer a young man. The fact that his hair was whiter, that he dragged his feet in walking, seemed to her the natural accompaniment of increasing years. She had no experience of illness and, seeing him so much better, believed him to be well.

The winter was a full, if not a particularly happy, time for Beatrice. Mrs. Enfield, having settled her daughter to her entire satisfaction, was pursuing with extraordinary industry her efforts on Beatrice's behalf. Beatrice could, had she wished, have married a dissolute peer, or a rising politician of the type rec-

ognised as likely to be a force in the House some day, if the results justified the promise. She liked this man—he was called Wilson—but at no time was she in love with him. He admired her immensely, which was not surprising; she was one of the most beautiful girls in London.

Mrs. Enfield would have preferred the peer as a husband for her protégée; the politician, not having risen, was not particularly noteworthy; and the title added lustre. The owner's private character she was inclined to slur over; possibly in the lustre of the title it was lost sight of. But since Beatrice ruled him out in the bluntest manner, she set to work with considerable determination to bring the political affair to a triumphant issue, knowing nothing of that poor little romance which had been nipped before it blossomed.

Beatrice never saw Hurst now. Whether Edward had conveyed a hint to him, or if he were sticking to his oft-made and formerly ill-kept resolve to see her no more, she had no means of judging. He was stationed at Aldershot, she believed. Teddy was also at Aldershot; but that circumstance was not calculated to gain her any information concerning the man whose influence over her, despite what she had learned to his discredit, was too great for her to banish him from her thoughts, or to expel him from the place he had made for himself in her affections. She despised herself for loving him; but no amount of scorn could alter facts. The one grain of comfort—it was a very small grain—in the whole miserable affair was that no one knew about it. The secret was her own; she had confided it to no one. There had been so little to confide

—just the call of one heart to another, a break, and then silence—the answering voice was stilled, lost amid the distracting echoes that drowned by their confusion the purer sound.

During the entire winter Mrs. Enfield did not relax her matrimonial efforts. She believed she was succeeding admirably. Ernest Wilson had reached the stage which advertises itself by the sending of floral gifts, and the display of marked attention. Beatrice, so far as Mrs. Enfield was able to judge, did not discourage him. He was not easily discouraged, holding himself in very good esteem, and attacking the business of courtship, as he attacked the business of life, with the pertinacity of a man accustomed to attaining his end, even when faced with considerable opposition. He recognised the opposition. Beatrice was so insistently friendly, so determined not to admit the element of sentiment into their intercourse, that he realised quite clearly the business of wooing her was likely to be a lengthy and difficult matter. But difficulties attracted him; and it pleased him to think that the girl he honoured with his affection was not to be easily won. Her manifest reluctance formed a large share of her fascination for him. At the same time, he had no intention of waiting indefinitely; he meant to have some kind of answer before the winter passed.

“You can’t, you know, keep me for ever on the doorstep,” he observed to her one evening.

They were sitting in a sort of sham conservatory off the stairs at a house where music was the ostensible reason for the gathering, and he had made some remark of a more intimate character than usual which

had not been well received. At his last speech Beatrice turned more directly towards him and smiled faintly.

"No one need remain on a doorstep," she replied. "There is always the alternative of going away."

He reddened and looked vexed.

"I don't think that was a particularly kind speech," he protested.

"Perhaps," she allowed, "it wasn't. But then, I don't consider there was any reason in your complaint. I admitted you across the threshold of friendship long ago."

"Oh, friendship!" he said. . . . "Yes. But that isn't enough for me. You must have realised ere this that I want more than friendship from you."

She shook her head.

"It's no use," she said—"not the slightest. I haven't anything more to give. I like you—very much. I enjoy talking with you; I am always glad to see you, but—that's all."

"That is quite good for a start," he said. "I'm not exacting, and I've a fair amount of patience, I believe. Only it's chilly on the doorstep. Don't repeat your advice, please; that is chillier. Besides, I have an antipathy for beating a retreat."

"Forward is a good watchword for a politician," she said.

"Yes," he agreed. "I have adopted it."

"At the same time," she argued, "what applies to public life can't always be fitted to a man's domestic affairs. You've got to keep the two things separate."

"In a way, yes," he allowed. Then he plunged

clumsily. "A man looks to his wife for a lot of help in his public life, all the same. Mainly that's what he marries for. Marriage is a highly important move in the game."

This view, although not altogether new, surprised Beatrice, coming from Wilson. She had not heard it expressed before. That the most important adventure in life should be subordinated to a man's career sounded oddly in her ears, jarred her sense of proportion. To select a mate with regard primarily to certain essentials that were likely to prove helpful to one's advancement, seemed to her exalting the lesser at the expense of significant things.

"I should have supposed that marriage might be reckoned the most important move in life," she returned quietly. "That's how I regard it. After all, it stands for the happiness or unhappiness of two persons. That is not a light consideration."

"No," he said, "of course not. It is an important step. If more people realised its importance there wouldn't be so many unsuitable matches. One needs to be prudent—to look at the question all round. It isn't a matter only of physical attraction; it is a matter of general suitability and mutual helpfulness. These things ensure happiness."

"Do they? It sounds to me cold and unsatisfying. I fancy there is more than a touch of the primitive savage in me. Your argument for suitability repels me. There is only one quality which is essential, and that embraces everything."

"What is it?" he asked.

"You will know when you experience it," she answered, smiling.

"Ah!" he said. "Perhaps I have experienced it."

She shook her head, smiling still.

"Oh, dear, no! You will cease to be a philosopher when you do."

He sat up a little stiffly.

"I don't think you understand me very well," he said.

Beatrice met his protesting eyes frankly, with nothing warmer in her own than a kindly interest. She had never seen him in any than a confident mood before; the air of aggrieved, half-sulky perplexity sat ill upon him. She preferred him confident and assertive; these qualities were natural to the man.

"Does anyone ever understand another human being?" she asked.

"I think so. It's largely a matter of sympathy."

"Then that's a quality I must be altogether lacking in," she returned. "The human mind is an eternal puzzle to me. It's just a muddle of fine things and base; and it appears to be due chiefly to the accident of circumstance which quality prevails."

"Isn't that rather a bitter theory?" he asked.

It occurred to him that her expression as well as her words were bitter, as he watched the partly averted face, and noted the clouded look in the soft eyes, darkened momentarily by the ghost memories of unbidden thought.

"Let us pride ourselves we are made of stouter stuff than that. Our wills at least are not governed by chance. I've a kind of feeling that if I yielded to a

base impulse it would be deliberate and not accidental. I don't wish to shirk responsibility for my acts. There is something undignified in that idea."

She looked at him again, arrested by his words, and interested. He was himself once more, authoritative, assured, slightly didactic. She understood that in continuing the subject he was humouring her, that he did not take her altogether seriously; he held quite conventional views in respect to feminine intelligence. She knew that; but it had never seemed to her that his views mattered particularly. She liked him apart from those small issues. What he had said concerning a man's responsibility in obeying his impulses impressed her; it swept away the flimsy defence she had put forward deliberately in extenuation of human frailty. There was not a shred of justification in her argument. Each one is directly responsible for his own acts. It is the deed which forms the character; character has no part in shaping the deed.

Almost she wished he had left her her shadowy reflective comfort; she had derived a gleam of satisfaction from it. Now she felt rather like a person who has been robbed. Although the thing filched from her had been valueless, she resented the theft.

Before she had time to answer, if indeed she could have found an answer to his speech, the greenery behind them parted, and Charlie's boyish, cheery countenance beamed upon them through the opening.

"You have a genius for rendering yourself invisible, Bee, my dear," he observed pleasantly. "By obeying my intuition and searching for you in the most sequestered spots, I have unearthed you without

undue delay. Mrs. Enfield is in a hurry to get, so you had better come out into the open."

"Leaving already?" Wilson protested, rising when Beatrice rose, and surveying the interrupter with disfavour in his glance. "It's quite early."

"I expect we are going on somewhere," Beatrice explained.

"That's it," her brother responded. "Harmony creates discord in Mrs. Enfield's soul. She doesn't herself allow it's her soul; she says it gives her indigestion. But it's entirely a matter of opinion in which part of the anatomy the soul is located. I think myself it is adjacent to the liver. Are you ready, Bee?"

He held the palms aside for her to pass. She turned and looked back at her late companion across the green barricade which hedged him about.

"It is sequestered," she said, and smiled. "You look—lonely."

"Come back," he suggested.

"I would if it wasn't for the indigestion," she said.

Wilson thrust the ferns aside and followed her. He had had enough of the music too. If she was leaving he no longer cared to remain.

VIII

MATTERS continued in this unsatisfactory indeterminate state throughout the winter. Twice Wilson broached tentatively the subject of marriage, and met with no success: the third attempt would not be tentative; he purposed making a quite definite and final proposal, and abide by Beatrice's decision, whatever it might be. Because he was so settled in his purpose he hesitated to make his third appeal, being apprehensive as to the result, and liking ill the thought of failure which he foresaw was not inevitable—indeed, it occurred to him at times that his chances of success were not great. Although aware that Beatrice liked him, he realised that she entertained no very deep feeling for him. So many men paid her marked attention at that time that she was little likely to be moved to a reciprocal tenderness by the devotion of a particular man unless she were predisposed towards caring for him. He could by no means flatter himself that he had won her love.

While he pursued his uncertain courtship, while Mrs. Enfield, occupied with her daughter's approaching marriage, relaxed her efforts on Beatrice's behalf, believing that Beatrice's affairs were all but settled; and while Beatrice herself fretted away the days in futile regrets, Mr. Ashleigh, unheeded in the rush of selfish preoccupation, quietly loosened his hold on life

and slipped unobtrusively away, leaving the muddle he had contrived to get his affairs into to straighten itself or remain muddled, shifting his responsibilities as easily as he cast off the burden of living, not because he desired to, but because he was incapable of making the effort to right things. His misfortunes had crashed down upon him unexpectedly; they were largely responsible for the stroke which ended in his death.

By a fortunate chance Beatrice was with him at the time of his seizure. Mrs. Enfield had gone to Paris with Ellie for the mysterious purpose of the trousseau; it being a thoroughly substantiated fact that England is incapable of clothing her daughters suitably for so important an occasion, which is pathetic when one reflects upon the number of girls who cannot afford to go to Paris. Mrs. Enfield had wished Beatrice to accompany them; and until almost the eleventh hour it had been agreed that she should; at the eleventh hour, however, an unaccountable uneasiness had decided her to remain at home. She did not know what she feared; the dread was instinctive; she had no tangible grounds for deciding at the last moment against going; her reluctance to leave home, however, was irresistible. Later she believed she had been directed in this matter by forces outside her control.

On the afternoon that her father was taken ill she happened to be out. She returned in time for the five-o'clock tea, which, when she was at home, they invariably took together. It was a little after five, and she ran upstairs to the drawing-room, loosening her furs as she went, and throwing them carelessly on to

a chair near the door when she entered the room, which, lighted only by one shaded electric lamp on the tea-table, and by the warm, dull glow of the fire, seemed to her tenantless for the moment after entering, until she detected the outline of her father's figure sitting awkwardly crumpled together on a sofa. It was the unnatural stillness which had given the room its air of being unoccupied: the unnatural quiet of her father's pose accentuated this sense of emptiness; it caused her a queer stab of uneasiness.

"Father!" she called softly.

She approached nearer the sofa, went quite close to him, and bent down and looked into his face. It seemed to her in the first shock of uncomprehending terror that he was making grimaces at her, trying to frighten her; the next, she understood; and, with a sudden sick tightening at the heart, she leaned forward and pressed the bell, keeping her finger on it until the sound of hurrying feet assured her that the summons was being answered.

"Send for the doctor," she said quietly, as the door opened—"quickly. Take a taxi. There is not a minute for delay."

Then she took the crumpled, speechless form in her arms and laid it back against the cushions in a more reposeful attitude, and sat beside it until assistance came.

Mr. Ashleigh did not die that day, nor for several days. His sons came home in haste. He did not know them. He never regained consciousness, nor the power of movement or articulation. It seemed to Beatrice, when she stood beside the bed and looked on the still

figure lying upon it, that it was but the husk of the man that lay there; that the spirit had already departed and left the body breathing and still warm, yet dead in every essential save that of actual physical decay. She felt almost as though this were some stranger, and not the dear familiar form she loved.

Beatrice was undemonstrably deeply attached to her father; his illness, with the fear of impending loss, stunned her. She could not think what she would do when he had left her. They had always been together; her brothers, since they had grown up, since the one had his profession and outside interests, and the other had gone to Oxford and found separate interests also, had grown apart from the home life. There would not be, she realised with a sense of anticipatory loneliness, any home life when her father died, unless Teddy were willing to make a home with her. She did not feel very confident about that. If he were not willing, she imagined that she would continue living there alone.

The idea of living alone frightened her—alone in those big empty rooms, haunted with a memory, a presence which would be there and yet be invisible. She could not face the thought. She turned from it, shuddering, and wandered back to the sick-room to watch for some change, some sign which promised the recovery that she knew in her heart to be impossible.

The change when it did come was so slight as to be almost imperceptible. The sick man passed from unconsciousness to death—passed so quietly and swiftly that no one except the nurse was with him when he died in the early hours of the morning when

vitality is at its lowest and the thread of life snaps easily. It snapped so easily in his case that, save for the cessation of the breathing, and the settled dignity that composed the still features in the mask which death alone wears, it would have seemed to Beatrice, leaning over him, that no great change had come upon him since she had seen him last. She had looked upon the husk of the man then; it was the husk she looked upon now. He was still warm when for a moment she placed her hand upon his breast—warm but pulseless. The heart which had loved her was still—still with an awful, terrifying stillness. She felt that she must do something—lay hands upon the quiet form and shake it—do anything in order to set once more in motion the heart which had run down and could never beat again.

And then someone took her by the hand and drew her away from the bed and led her unresisting from the room. It was Charlie—Charlie who hated sadness, who cared only for what was jolly and bright. Charlie's expression was grave enough at the moment.

"He knows all about it by now, I expect—the dear old chap," he said.

Beatrice lifted her eyes, dark with the weight of their first great sorrow, to his, and scrutinised him in perplexed silence.

"The other side," he added jerkily.

"Oh!" said Beatrice.

And then slowly the tears came—the first she had shed throughout those weary days.

Mr. Ashleigh's only surviving brother, the Reverend Thomas Ashleigh, came up from Devonshire for

the funeral. He was in everything but name a stranger to his brother's family. Beatrice knew there was an uncle who was vicar of Wedgemere; she also knew that her father had quarrelled with him long ago, and had consistently refused the overtures towards reconciliation which were issued annually from the vicarage at the season of peace and goodwill. Mr. Ashleigh had been wont to refer to his brother as a canting hypocrite. It was therefore with no great cordiality that the children of the dead man prepared to receive this uncle whom they had never met. Edward Ashleigh alone experienced some slight relief at his coming; the burden of his father's affairs, into which he had been going with the latter's solicitor, being rather much for his shouldering with no other than professional counsel to help him to meet the shock of revelation, and discover a way out of the appalling muddle, a means of carrying on for a while and making some arrangement for his sister's future. When everything was settled up there would not be, so far as he could make out, enough for Beatrice to live upon.

Mr. Thomas Ashleigh, as counsellor, proved disappointing; his business acumen was less than his nephew's. He was a simple-souled, kindly man, with no great brilliance of intellect, but with a certain amount of common sense and a big and generous nature.

"I cannot help you with your father's affairs," he said to his nephew. "You must settle those with his solicitor. I understand nothing about finance, and the share market is unintelligible to me. Will there be nothing saved to you?"

"Practically nothing," Edward Ashleigh answered moodily. "What can be scraped together will of course be safely invested for Beatrice."

It was then that the man, who was in his nephew's opinion little better than an imbecile in worldly matters, showed his usefulness. If he could not help in regard to the business part, this was something which he could do; and he did it, as was his nature, promptly and simply.

"Never mind about Beatrice," he said. "For a time—for as long as she wishes—she can make her home with us. I should take her back with me, in any case. Her aunt is looking forward to her coming, and is expecting her. What I advise, if I may be permitted to make a suggestion without appearing to wish to interfere, is that Charles should continue with his course at Oxford so that his future shall be assured. When he is through then, if there is anything left, invest it for Beatrice. But there need be no concern for her future with two brothers behind her, and an old uncle who is happy to be able at last to show his affection for, and to attempt to win in return the affection of, his own kindred. A sad misunderstanding, having its origin in a wide divergence of opinion, separated your father and myself. But his death has altered all that; and I am confident that if it were possible for him to clasp my hand now in brotherly love he would do so unhesitatingly, as I have done often in my thoughts. All misunderstanding must end with this life. It is unthinkable that it could be otherwise."

He expounded his simple philosophy to his nephew's indifferent, inattentive ears with no shadow of doubt

of the young man's understanding and sympathy. Edward Ashleigh set that part of his speech aside as though it were of no importance, and, in comparison with his own harassed thoughts, this reference to an old-time feud sounded to him irrelevant, even trivial; the part of his uncle's speech which was deserving not only of attention but of gratitude, was that portion which bore directly on Beatrice's future. The practical offer of assistance afforded a solution of the immediate difficulty; it gave him time to make arrangements. Later, doubtless, something might be contrived that would obviate the need for Beatrice to trespass on her relations' kindness. It was not to be thought of that his sister should accept hospitality in the form of charity from anyone, even from her own uncle; but for the present there was nothing else so far as Edward could see for her to do. The storm had broken so unexpectedly: the vicarage offered a shelter, and there was none other available.

Edward Ashleigh was not at all sure how Beatrice would receive their uncle's invitation. He had an idea that she would object to go to these unknown relations. If she showed disinclination to accept, he meant to use persuasion. Clearly in the circumstances there was no choice open to her. Beatrice, however, revealed a surprising apathy when, alone with her in the evening on the day of the funeral, he told her as much as he knew of their circumstances, and asked her if it would be agreeable to her to accompany their uncle on the morrow and remain with her relations for a time until he could make other arrangements.

Beatrice was too depressed, too utterly absorbed in

her unhappiness, to give adequate thought to anything beyond these immediate distresses. She only vaguely apprehended her brother's meaning, and when he spoke of selling everything and giving up the house, she glanced round the handsome room with dull, uncomprehending eyes that rested mournfully upon familiar objects, so much a part of her existence that she could not realise their passing from her. Yet Teddy spoke of selling them—the good old pictures, the collection of years, everything—because it had to be.

"I wish you would get married," she said, "and let me live with you."

With hands thrust deep in his pockets, he regarded her critically. She was very likely, he thought, to solve the problem of a home for herself. So far as he was concerned, a soldier with extravagant tastes, and nothing beyond his pay to keep them up on, marriage was out of the question.

"I am not a marrying sort," he answered. "But you shan't bury yourself in Wedgemere all your days. For the present, though, it is a good arrangement."

"It's an awful wrench, breaking up the old home, Teddy," she whispered.

"Yes." He nodded, and evaded the wistful eyes. "It's beastly rough on you. Pity that civilisation upset the universal law which turned the young out of the family nest to fend for itself as soon as it was able. It was a beneficent providence that clung to the rule for the male being. When one stands on one's own feet these knocks hurt less."

"Yes," she said. "I wish now I had struck out for

myself. But it didn't seem to matter. I never thought"

"If only Mrs. Enfield were home," she added presently. "It's the going among strangers—just now—I shrink from."

"Well, after all," Teddy put in soothingly, "one can scarcely regard one's own kin as strangers. The old boy has behaved very decently. I daresay you'll find it all right."

Beatrice smiled drearily. She could not share her brother's easy optimism. It was not from the uncle whom she knew she shrank, but from the unknown aunt and clergyman cousin, whose acquaintance she would make for the first time when in unexpected poverty she would enter the vicarage as a pensioner on their bounty.

IX

BEATRICE arrived with her uncle at the vicarage in the evening. As a sort of anti-climax to the journey there was a long drive from the station to the house. It was not in local estimation considered long, but to the girl, accustomed to short distances, tired from the tedious journey, and numbed with the cold and an ever-increasing misery, the mile from the station seemed interminable. A pony carriage met them, driven by a youth of about seventeen, who combined the duties of groom and gardener and butler, and managed satisfactorily to himself to evade overwork by playing one amazing duty off against another. This estimable youth was known as Hurden. Among his equals the unnecessary preliminary letter was omitted, and the name thereby rendered more facile of expression if less euphonic. Hurden was a dirty, lazy youth, whose general improvement was a matter of intense personal interest to Mrs. Ashleigh.

Mrs. Ashleigh, a large, bright, efficient woman, with no especial breadth of outlook, but with an immense appreciation of the importance of her position as the wife of the vicar of the parish, and a laudable acceptance of her responsibilities, welcomed her niece, as she would have welcomed anyone belonging to her husband's family, particularly anyone who was afflicted with a new and very real sorrow, with open-hearted

kindliness, and a tactless show of cheerfulness, her idea of practical sympathy confining itself to the timely demonstration of the inevitable silver lining. Since Beatrice was in no mood to recognise a silver lining had such a thing been evident, her aunt's determined effort to ignore any cause for grief accorded ill with her depression. She shrank within herself before the breezy welcome; and Mrs. Ashleigh, realising without understanding this absence of response, decided that the beautiful girl with the soft eyes and the sweet expression was in reality hard, and possibly needed the chastening sorrow which had overtaken her. Her son, however, coming in when the frugal Lenten meal was half-way through, formed an altogether different opinion. James Ashleigh was so greatly impressed with the stranger's pallor and look of weary sadness that, rising after a hurried meal, he stood for a moment before going out again and attentively scrutinised the white, tired face.

"I think Miss Ashleigh should have a glass of wine, mother, and go to bed," he said.

Mrs. Ashleigh looked up surprised, and intercepting the glance of quickened interest which flashed unexpectedly from the saddened eyes, she asked with some abruptness:

"Don't you feel well?"

"I am not unwell," Beatrice answered. "And I don't want anything. But I should like to go to bed. I am very tired."

Mrs. Ashleigh motioned to her son to ring the bell, and requested the servant who answered it to light the visitor to her room. It occurred to the young

clergyman as he went out into the hall that it would have been only kind had his mother accompanied the girl upstairs herself. He stood with his hat in his hand and the hall door open, and waited for Beatrice to appear. She came out from the dining-room alone, the servant following and closing the door behind her.

James Ashleigh struck a match and lighted one of the candles on the hall table.

"I hope you will feel rested to-morrow," he said gravely, handing her candlestick to her. "You look very tired."

She smiled as she took the light from his hand with a word of thanks, and, standing beside him with the cold night air blowing the flame of the candle sideways, she looked beyond him through the open door. A few yards away across the road she could see the church, and the light streaming softly through the chancel window and falling warmly upon a gleaming headstone in the churchyard.

"Is there service—to-night?" she asked, surprised.

Abruptly James smiled. It was a pleasant smile, and it lightened his face wonderfully and made it distinctively attractive.

"No—only choir practice."

"Oh! And do you have to go to that?"

"I superintend generally," he said, and looked faintly amused. "We are famed for our choir. You will be able to judge on Sunday if I boast without reason."

He held out his hand with the quick, awkward gesture that characterised his movements, and which was

due, Beatrice realised, to shyness, and wished her good-night.

"Good-night," she returned. "I shall think of you when I am in my room, training refractory village boys for the delectation of an unappreciative audience on Sunday."

"Oh, our congregation isn't unappreciative," he said, substituting the more suitable term for the one she had used with no conscious attempt at correction. "You will see by the way we all join in the singing how enthusiastic we are. Don't stand in the cold," he added, his hand on the door. "The air is very raw to-night."

She nodded, smiled, and turned to mount the stairs. Before she reached the landing she heard the hall door slam behind him, and then followed the clang of the garden gate, as the latch, forced by a strong, impatient hand, swung home again and rattled noisily back into the catch.

The maid had gone on and turned up the gas in her bedroom, a somewhat cheerless room overlooking the churchyard. But a bright fire burned in the grate, and the curtains had been closely drawn, shutting out with the fog-laden atmosphere the soft glow from the painted windows, and the dark outline of the tall spire against the mist-veiled sky.

When the maid left her Beatrice turned down the gas and drew the curtains back from the window and leaned with her arms on the broad sill and looked out. She was not inclined for sleep; the unusual happenings of the day made her strangely wakeful. She had sought her room solely from a desire for solitude.

Softly from across the road the sound of the organ reached her ears. She smiled to herself while she listened, and it flashed through her mind to wonder what her father would make of it if he could see her among these new and unfamiliar surroundings, a member of this household which he had affected to despise.

"I suppose it is always like this," she mused, putting up her hands and loosening the soft hair until it fell about her shoulders and framed her face in a halo of pale gold—"choir practices and services and the conversation limited to parochial matters. . . . And rigid fasting during Lent. . . ."

She glanced at the fire glowing on the hearth, and the sight of it, refuting her ungenerous criticism, caused her a sudden feeling of shame. However rigorously self-denial was practised at the vicarage, it was clear that the duty of hospitality was not allowed to be crushed by it. They were well meaning, these new-found relations; they desired to be kind.

She remained at the window until the music ceased; then, still busy with her own sad thoughts, she watched the lights in the church extinguished one by one until complete darkness prevailed. A troop of boisterous choir boys tumbled out from a side door and scampered noisily round the churchyard before dispersing. Her cousin James came out after them and crossed the road and entered the vicarage gate. Then, under her window it seemed, a voice that sounded in her ears as the voice of some plaintive child-angel burst forth into song. The unexpected sound stirred her, and the words, plainly audible in the quiet night, fell

upon the silence with a sweet, shrill, indescribable pathos which moved her powerfully:

“And how can we in exile drear
Sing out, as they, sweet songs of home?”

The words were from a hymn the choir had been practising for Sunday, and the voice belonged to little David Hopkins, the sweetest singer and most mischievous boy in Wedgemere.

As the voice died away in the distance, the church clock chimed the half-hour after nine, striking with a harsh though musical insistence that seemed to set a seal of finality upon everything. Abruptly Beatrice moved, and, laying a hand on the curtains, pulled them quickly together, shutting out as before the cheerless atmosphere and the dark, tapering spire which, like a monster index finger, pointed ever upward.

Beatrice slept ill, and was in consequence late for breakfast the following morning. Punctuality at the vicarage was an unwritten law. The bell rang at eight. Mistaking it for the dressing-bell, Beatrice did not hasten. Twice a maid was sent up with inquiries, and when finally she arrived downstairs she found everyone seated at table. Her own breakfast was, as Mrs. Ashleigh expressed it, “keeping warm” in a covered dish before the hearth. Her cousin rose to fetch it for her.

“Didn’t you sleep?” Mrs. Ashleigh asked, regarding her attentively as she took her seat.

Beatrice, feeling that she was being rebuked for slothfulness, flushed warmly.

“Not very well,” she answered. “The church clock

disturbed me. And I'm afraid I mistook the breakfast for the dressing-bell. I forgot to ask at what hour you breakfasted. I am sorry to be late."

"We don't have a dressing-bell," Mrs. Ashleigh replied; "everyone is up, you see. What time did you breakfast at home?"

"Half-past nine generally," Beatrice answered. "But we weren't very punctual."

"Half-past nine!" Her aunt looked horrified. "That leaves no morning," she said; "you had no time to do anything."

"I expect," James observed, cutting a slice of bread with the intention of toasting it for his cousin, "Miss Ashleigh worked her time in at the other end. London keeps different hours from the country, mother."

Beatrice turned to watch him as he knelt before the fire, holding the bread on a fork and screening his eyes from the flames with his hand. She liked James. If anything could make life tolerable in Wedgemere the society of her cousin might, she decided. He was the most sympathetic person she had met with so far.

"I think Beatrice will have to accommodate herself to our ways," Mrs. Ashleigh said. "If we kept London hours here we should get nothing done. I am looking to you for quite a lot of help in the parish," she added, turning directly to the girl.

In this way Beatrice was given to understand that her aunt was resigned to the idea of receiving her into the family. It was the only allusion that was made in her hearing to the indefinite conditions of her visit.

"You will find me disappointing, I'm afraid," she

replied, "but not unwilling. I have never done any work of that kind."

"So I understand."

Mrs. Ashleigh had disapproved of her brother-in-law entirely: most particularly she had disapproved of him in his paternal relationship; such men were unfitted for the responsibilities of fatherhood. She saw in his abrupt removal, in the stroke of destiny which brought his daughter under the vicarage roof and the influence of spiritual guidance, the hand of God stretched forth to gather this wanderer into the fold.

X

BEATRICE was an enigma to Mrs. Ashleigh; she did not, as her aunt expressed it, seem to fit in anywhere; even socially she gave little help. This last was a surprise to Mrs. Ashleigh, who had gathered that latterly the girl's life had been given up to social pleasures. The wide difference in the interests of the associates she had mixed with compared with those of the people who frequented the vicarage was a point which Mrs. Ashleigh overlooked.

Beatrice was not in touch with Wedgemere; and Wedgemere, with few exceptions, made no effort to get into contact. She was an enigma to the parish as well as to her aunt. Chief among her eccentricities was a defiance of the ordinary rules of convention: she refused to wear mourning. She had made the journey from London in a navy travelling-suit which in the gaslight Mrs. Ashleigh had mistaken for black. Later she remonstrated with the girl on the impropriety of wearing colours in the first days of her bereavement; and Beatrice, observing her in amazement, became aware that her aunt was attired in all the sombreness of one who mourns a near relation.

"Father didn't care about mourning," she said. "He didn't like any of those customs."

"But it is a sign of respect," Mrs. Ashleigh urged.

"That's what he resented," Beatrice explained—

"advertised emotion. In his opinion one's feelings didn't need public expression, and the parade of affliction was simply objectionable. I wear the clothes he was accustomed to see me in because I know that would please him best."

"It looks odd," Mrs. Ashleigh replied, and, meeting the steady gaze of the dark eyes, said nothing further. She stood a little in awe of her niece.

"I don't understand Beatrice," she complained to her son. "She is hard and difficult. One cannot get into sympathy with her."

"We'll be patient," he said. "She is missing her father and her friends. We can't expect to make up to her all at once for what she has lost. She'll respond in time."

"But," Mrs. Ashleigh insisted, "she is so unusual. It isn't only in the matter of mourning—though that is sufficiently peculiar, and excites comment in the parish. She brings her own strange ideas to bear upon everything. Only this morning, in decorating the altar vases, she threw aside the backs of the vases and arranged the flowers as though she were decorating a drawing-room; and when I remonstrated with her on the unseemliness of it, she appeared quite annoyed. She asked if God prefers His flowers stiff why He doesn't make them grow so."

Which James felt, though he did not say so, was something of a facer.

"Before we can hope to get into touch with her we must bring her into closer touch with the life we lead," he replied.

Mrs. Ashleigh looked up at him doubtfully.

"I expect I am a little prejudiced," she admitted, and sighed.

He stooped suddenly and kissed her.

"You have the kind heart," was all he said.

On Sunday at the midday meal, which was cold according to an invariable custom at the vicarage, James Ashleigh asked his cousin what she thought of the singing.

"It was as good as anything I have heard," she said.

"Then I didn't exaggerate?"

"No. I confess I was astonished. That small boy with the blue eyes, and the confiding smile, has an extraordinary voice—so sweet and true. Who is he?"

"That is David Hopkins," he answered; and the gravity of his voice, with the gravity of the expression on the faces of her uncle and aunt, arrested Beatrice's attention. Had her question been indiscreet it could not have been received with greater seriousness.

"He has a good voice," the vicar put in, breaking the silence which had followed upon James' reply. "But he has no right to be singing in the choir; he is not yet christened."

His concern was so genuine that Beatrice, although she could not sympathise with his view, respected it none the less.

"How comes it that a choir boy should have been overlooked?" she asked.

"They are newcomers here," the vicar explained. "Mr. Jennings indiscreetly admitted him to the choir on account of his voice before making proper inquiries. James is preparing him for baptism now."

Being a case of what we term adult baptism, a certain amount of preparation is necessary."

Beatrice knew all about that; her own case had been one of adult baptism.

"I'll help you, if you like," she said, with a smile. "I have taken a fancy to that little boy."

James looked up and caught the smile.

"You will need to bear in mind that it takes very little kindness to spoil boys of that class," he said.

Beatrice showed surprise.

"I wasn't aware that humble origin made a difference in the dispositions of children," she said.

"It is a matter of training rather than of origin," he replied. "That class of boy is not disciplined to a particular code of honour. One has to have that continually in mind in order to understand them."

Beatrice's experience of boys was limited to her brothers and their friends. But it occurred to her as unfair to arrogate to any one class a monopoly of certain virtues. If one class benefits through training, there is a traditional honour that is common to all.

"I believe you are mistaken," she said. "I shall get to know your boys and endeavour to prove that you are wrong."

"It seems to me that you are inclined to be argumentative, Beatrice," Mrs. Ashleigh observed.

James caught the girl's eye and smiled.

"It will be a good thing if you do interest yourself in the boys," he said. "No lady in the parish troubles about them. The girls get all the attention."

"Mr. Gervais looks after the choir boys," Mrs. Ash-

leigh interposed. "I don't think he would care to be interfered with."

Mr. Gervais was the assistant curate, a very high churchman, an ascetic, and a firm believer in himself and in his God. Beatrice had met him on the previous day. She did not like him, and she had a very strong persuasion that her dislike was reciprocated.

"I don't see why Gervais should object," remarked the vicar. "It isn't as though his sister were interested in them. They laugh at her, I'm afraid."

"It would annoy me exceedingly if they were to laugh at me," Beatrice said.

He looked amused.

"They have no abnormal sense of humour," he responded. "She is—a little eccentric; but a very earnest, good-hearted woman."

From which Beatrice gathered that Miss Gervais was an oddity. The parish was composed, it seemed to her, of curious types. Possibly the country bred such people, or possibly they were peculiar to Wedgemere; assuredly she had never met their like anywhere else. The only people who promised to be interesting, and were more of her own world, were the Lawrences, a sporting family, who owned the best house in Wedgemere, and spent their days, and occasionally their Sundays also, solely in pursuit of amusement. They were far from good church people; but were tolerated in the parish on account of their liberality. Mrs. Ashleigh disapproved of them, though she could not raise any personal objection, since they made up in charm for certain deficits, and invariably disarmed

her when they met with an insistent graciousness of manner.

They called early in the week, the visit being principally on Beatrice's account. There was a daughter of about Beatrice's age, and she came with her mother, a fresh, healthy specimen of English girlhood, with a keen love for outdoor life and animals and motor-cars, and very little knowledge of anything outside these interests. She got Beatrice to herself in a corner, and sounded her diplomatically in regard to her tastes. She was manifestly uncertain as to Beatrice's rightful element; but an idea that it was not parochial gave her confidence to pursue her researches.

"Do you ride?" she asked presently. "Oh, good!" she exclaimed, on her question being answered in the affirmative. "Then you must follow the hounds with me. We can always manage a mount. There isn't a girl about here who does anything more spirited than attend Zenana meetings."

Beatrice looked mystified.

"Whatever is a Zenana meeting?" she asked.

"How nice of you not to know," Enid Lawrence said, with a quiet laugh. "I'm not very clear myself—it's a kind of Boorioboola-Gha, I imagine."

"I shall know more about it later," Beatrice returned, smiling. "I am being broken in to parish work. It's all new to me; but it's interesting. My cousin wishes me to do some visiting——"

"Not district work?" the other girl interrupted in amaze.

"I am not to have a district—yet." Beatrice looked openly amused. "A few pet cases only are to be

turned over to me. It's a sort of special privilege. James thinks I shall find pleasure in it."

"And do you think so?"

"I am doubtful. And I'm diffident about undertaking it; they'll detect me at once for a fraud. Don't you think it is amazing cheek for a worldly minded, uninformed person like myself to adventure in that way? They are old people too, some of them. It occurs to me that we take great liberties with the poor. I told James so; and he said the poor of the parish would resent it, and feel hurt, if they were overlooked. It is odd to me. One point I am firm upon; I won't take a class in the Sunday school. That is a great disappointment to my aunt. But my uncle sides with me. I am not to be urged to do anything against my wishes. He's a dear."

"Yes. Everyone loves the vicar. There are one or two in the parish who also love the curate."

"Mr. Gervais?" Beatrice asked, surprised.

"I didn't mean Mr. Gervais; my remark referred to your cousin."

"Oh, James! That isn't surprising; he's so kind. And it's a civilised instinct to cherish an infatuation for one's pastor. I passed through that phase at sixteen. It's—elevating."

"You must come and see me—soon," Miss Lawrence observed. "I can give you local information which you won't gather from other sources. The history of the entire parish is known to me. We've always lived here. Funny, isn't it? One gets rusted into one's hole when one never moves. Don't take up too many parish duties—I have none; and I want to

see something of you . . . a lot, in fact. I have a persuasion we are going to be friends."

Beatrice felt a touch of the same persuasion. There was a mixture of dash and frankness, a well-bred kindliness, an absence of pose with a disregard for criticism in this new acquaintance which was distinctly attractive. When she had taken her departure she remained fixed sharp and clear in Beatrice's mind, as a good portrait sketch stands out, defined and arresting, among a collection of neutral-toned prints.

XI

IT was two months later when Beatrice sat down to reply to a characteristic letter from Mrs. Enfield, in which the latter urged her to go to them before or after Ellie's wedding in May, and stay as long as was convenient to herself—altogether, if she could.

"It must be *appalling*," she wrote, heavily underlining the word, "to live in a vicarage. I've always pitied clergymen's daughters—particularly country clergy. The wives have only themselves to blame, but girls don't choose their fathers' professions. It is so selfish of clergymen to marry and have daughters; sons, of course, can get away. It is not the slightest use pretending that you like it; you are not in the least good, you know; and it must be the last thing in dulness. . . ."

There followed gossiping references to acquaintances, and quite at the end she added:

"Mr. Wilson is always inquiring after you. He seems to miss you tremendously. It is possible if you don't come up certain of your friends will be for rustivating in the country."

Inexplicably this letter—a link in the broken chain of past events—depressed Beatrice. A more acute nostalgia seized her than anything she had felt before. The whole tone of the letter breathed the gay, careless, pleasure-filled atmosphere of the old life,

with its selfish indulgences, its easy tolerance, its kindly insincerity. These things, which at one time had not always seemed quite worth while, appeared to her amazingly good viewed in the retrospect. What greater good did she do now—did anyone in Wedgemere do—than she had done then, following only the path it pleased her to take? Mrs. Enfield was right; she did not fit in here. She was a stranger, among strange people, cut adrift from her friends.

She sat with the letter in her lap and stared into the fire with thoughtful eyes, in which memory stirred insistently, clouding their expression with the intruding of regrets. She was sick with hunger for the old life and the friends who belonged to the past. It was the old grievous lamentation expressed mutely in the language of the present: "My lovers and friends hast Thou put away from me, and hid mine acquaintance out of my sight."

Rousing herself presently, she started to answer the letter, writing on her knee with a fountain pen.

"You are right," she said; "I don't like it here. But that's my fault; and I have to try to cure myself of prejudices before I give in. Everyone is very kind. They all lead busy, useful lives. I am hoping to do the same in time. If I find I can make myself useful, I shall stay; if I am a failure, then of course I'll give in. I have an idea I could earn my living as a milliner's assistant. I know you will buy your hats of me if it comes to that. I can't come up for the wedding; it's too soon. I wonder what my aunt would think if I proposed it? She is attending a Girls' Friendly this evening, and I am quite alone. My

mourning is too recent for such dissipation. I believe they dance together—all girls! It sounds unexciting, but no doubt it is very jolly. Such simple pleasures seem to afford amusement here. Enjoyment, like so many things, is relative. Perhaps these people are right, and it is we who lose something in our lack of appreciation of simple things."

At which point an interruption occurred. Hurden entered in his capacity of butler, bearing a rather grimy notebook on a salver which he proffered with an air of dignified disdain.

"The choir boys are round collectin' for their cricket club, miss. They want to know if you will kindly give a trifle?"

Beatrice examined the book. There were many entries in it for insignificant amounts, ranging from one penny to sixpence. The first page had been reserved for the more important names.

"The vicar should have this first," she said.

"'E's in 'is study, miss. 'Twasn't likely I was goin' to interrupt 'im for that."

"No," she agreed. "Are the boys waiting?"

"Yes, miss—two of 'em, in the 'all."

"I will take this to them myself," she said.

She carried the book to the study. The vicar, who was busy preparing his sermon, raised his head at sight of her and showed unmistakable surprise. Beatrice met his gaze with questioning eyes, a little uncertain whether she did right to intrude; and, as though he read her doubt in her face, he welcomed her with a smile.

"Am I wanted for anything?" he asked.

"You are busy," she said, hovering on the threshold with the book in her hand. "I'm sorry. I ought not to have come. But the choir boys are collecting for their cricket club, and plainly you ought to head the list."

"Put me down for a shilling," he said. "Or, since you have it there"—and he held out a hand—"give me the book."

"A shilling!" she objected.

"Come, now," he said, smiling. "What's wrong with that?"

"Shabby!" she murmured. "For the credit of the house, you must make it half a crown."

He laughed, and wrote in the little book as she directed.

"There!" he said, and handed it back to her with the money. "I couldn't afford to let you be my almoner on all occasions. We have many calls."

She stooped and imprinted a kiss on his forehead by way of thanks before retiring; and the vicar, who was growing very fond of his brother's child, sat idly in his chair for some minutes after she had left him, gazing at the closed door, the lingering of a smile lighting the kindly features.

Beatrice meanwhile was interviewing the captain and vice-captain in the hall. She produced a shilling from her own pocket and added it to the collection, which splendid munificence so won their admiration that they decided, upon leaving her, to confer on her the position of secretary to the club, an honour which she owed in some measure to the intelligent interest

she betrayed in cricket, and the promise to attend a match sometime.

When the boys had gone, she went back to the drawing-room and her letter; and shortly after it was finished James came in. He looked tired—so tired that Beatrice was moved to suggest that he should stretch himself out on the sofa. He laughed, and dropped into a chair opposite her.

“Do I look so decrepit?” he asked, and approached a strong, muscular hand to the fire.

“You look fagged out,” she replied. “You’ve been on the go all day. I haven’t seen you except at meals. Is Percival shirking?”

James’ eyes twinkled. Percival was Mr. Gervais. His cousin usually spoke of him in this manner when they two were alone. He was fairly accustomed to her flippancy.

“I’ve just left him,” he replied. “He’s down with flu, and going to be pretty bad by the look of him. Miss Gervais wants to know if you will go to-morrow and read to old Narramore in her stead? She is nursing her brother, and can’t get away.”

“Read to old Narramore!” Beatrice echoed. “Read what?—the newspaper?”

James suppressed a smile.

“Miss Gervais reads the Bible to him, I believe; but I don’t see that there need be any objection to your giving him a change. I daresay he’d enjoy it. You might find time for both.”

“Rather an odd assortment, isn’t it?” she suggested.

"No—religion fits in everywhere; the daily news is not opposed to it—or shouldn't be."

"Do you wish me to do this?" she asked, looking at him directly.

James sat forward, nursing one knee between his hands, and observing her while he talked with interested, gravely admiring eyes. The picture she made, sitting in the low chair in the glow of the firelight, clad in a simple black dress, open at the throat, and with a daring touch of colour to contradict the suggestion of mourning introduced by the addition of crimson silk stockings, was pleasing and arresting. James had never before beheld anyone so gracious and so alluringly feminine as this suddenly found girl cousin of his. He liked to see her in his home.

"I'd like you to do it," he replied; "but it isn't my request. There is something I want you to undertake more urgently—to undertake entirely, not merely for an occasion."

"What is that?" she asked, in non-committal tones, and this time she did not look at him, but stared into the flames instead.

"Well," he said, still studying her with unconscious intentness, "I'm not altogether sure that you'll care about it. And yet I am persuaded that you could give more real help than anyone else. It is a very sad home—just two old people, Rogers and his wife; and the wife is dying—piecemeal, as one might say. It's gangrene."

Beatrice shuddered. The man, watching her unceasingly, saw the look of repulsion, almost of disgust, which swept across her face.

"You wouldn't like it," he said quickly. "It's too painful."

His disappointment was manifest, though he strove to hide it. He had felt all along that it was rather much to expect from her; but he believed in her thoroughly—in her womanly compassion, her ready sympathy; and he managed somehow, without ever expressing it, to convey this belief in her to her mind.

"Tell me more," she said briefly.

"They are devoted, the old couple," he said. "When his wife dies old Rogers will be broken-hearted. It will always be a sad case, you see, for anyone who interests himself actively in it. The old wife cannot live long; it's a matter of months now. She might go to the infirmary, but she has a horror of it, and the old man won't let her go. He does everything for her, and waits on her untiringly. The district nurse, of course, goes in every day. There is nothing wanted in the little home, except hope and brightness. It was just that need which, when I realised it, made me think of you."

"Oh, James!" she said, and turned towards him a face so sad in its expression that he read her thought even before she uttered it. "How can I, who am unhappy myself, bring hope and brightness to others?"

"It's just what you can do," he answered, with assurance. "Because you are unhappy, you will understand their sorrow, and because of their sorrow you will conceal your own. I know you have that in you . . . oh! I know so well."

"You are asking a very difficult thing of me," she said.

"If it were easy it would not be so well worth the doing," he replied. "Anyone can be kind when the kindness calls for no effort. The majority of us do little helpful things, that stand for nothing but what they signify in themselves, daily; but the things which count are the things which call for sacrifice. I am asking now one of those big things of you. I know it is in you to do it. I believe you will do it."

Suddenly Beatrice smiled.

"You haven't left me a loophole," she said. "I wonder if you realise what extraordinary persuasive powers you possess? I'll do it—yes. I'll call there to-morrow on my way to old Narramore."

"I'm glad," he said simply. "I felt somehow you would. And I know what pleasure it will give the old people to see someone young and sweet. A little human sympathy is a sermon without words."

Beatrice looked round quickly. His speech, reminding her of something she had it in her mind to say to him, suggested further that the opportunity for saying it had presented itself and could never be better timed.

"I want you," she said abruptly, "to do something for me."

"Yes!" he said, and seemed amused at this rapid demand for repayment in kind. "I think you are placing me now in the position of having no loophole."

"I don't know," she replied, and looked at him a little doubtfully. His eyes met hers fully—brown, pleasant, friendly eyes, with a hint of a smile in them

which encouraged her to proceed. "I want you to get your sermons up," she said.

Beatrice did not expect her cousin to take this advice unmoved. She knew that a simple, earnest man like James would shrink from the suggestion of striving after effect. To use one's talents worthily, and to the full of one's power, would scarcely, in his opinion, be consistent with rhetorical effort that at best must be artificial, or with the studied turning of his phrases with a view solely to their literary improvement. James never wrote out his sermons; and, since he was neither a fluent nor an effective speaker, the result, as Beatrice recognised, was inadequate to the quite excellent material of which his sermons were composed. He stiffened and changed colour.

"I shouldn't care to do that," he said.

"I daresay not. I don't exactly care for sick-rooms and the miseries of other people. But we can't always order things as we would have them. I think if you took additional pains to present your sermons effectively you might do more in the way of gaining attention. Write them out and learn them and declaim them aloud. I'll help you, if you'll let me. You could reach many hearts that you don't even touch, if you would only take the necessary trouble. See how crowded the church is when Mr. Gervais preaches. They don't know it, but the people flock to listen to his oratory, not to his actual words. It's all effect, really; nothing remains when he has ceased speaking. He has never preached a sermon since I've been here that has been half as good as one of yours—if one takes subject-matter alone into consideration. But

you can't fill the church as he can. Yet every time I hear you I carry away something which makes the world seem sweeter and life better worth the while."

"Isn't that better than oratory?" he asked, flushing.

"I should carry that something away still, and possibly other things, if you declaimed them with a richer eloquence; and other people, who listen now inattentively, would carry more away likewise. It's worth it, James. Think it over."

To James' infinite relief, perhaps also to Beatrice's, Mrs. Ashleigh entered the room at this moment, bringing with her an odour of dust and smoke and paraffin, the result of a badly trimmed lamp in the schoolroom, which had smoked vilely and charged the atmosphere with smuts. Some of the smuts had settled upon her face and, refusing to be dislodged by her handkerchief, stuck there tenaciously, as the reek of oil clung to her garments. Despite which discomforts, and the fact that she showed unmistakable signs of weariness, she appeared surprisingly cheerful and seemed to have enjoyed herself. Odd, Beatrice reflected as she was moved often to reflect, that people could derive amusement from such things.

XII

JAMES informed his cousin on the following day that he would like to accompany her to the Rogers' cottage. Since he had other things to attend to during the early afternoon, he suggested a meeting-place; and punctually to the minute he was on the spot, where Beatrice, knowing that his time was of value, was already arrived.

She observed him critically as he approached, walking rapidly against the wind, his head lowered and advanced to meet it, rather as a woman meets the wind, having regard to her headwear. The skirts of his long coat blew out on either side of him like sails loosely spread. And yet there was nothing absurd in his appearance. James was an athletic, well-built man; the virility of his physical development was borne out in the quiet strength of his face. Beatrice came out from her shelter behind a wall and joined him.

"Petticoats are a nuisance in weather like this, aren't they, Jimmy?" she said.

He laughed.

"They act as a restraining influence," he replied. "I hope you haven't been waiting. The wind is very keen."

"Not long. And you are hard on time anyway. I'm feeling nervous, James. It is rather like paying a visit to the dentist."

"You'll get over that," he returned, "when we arrive there. They are a dear, grateful old couple. You'll like them."

It was a poor little cottage in a mean street, with nothing of beauty about it, and a curious flatness in the quality of the air such as one experiences usually only in big cities. The street was narrow, and the houses, narrow too and gardenless, ranged in sad-looking uniformity on either side, seeming to watch one another with furtive suspicion from behind the torn and, for the greater part, dirty window curtains, which were dirty of necessity rather than negligence; to wash them would have meant their final destruction. Beatrice saw the dirt and blamed the housewives; James, who knew something of the lives and circumstances of these poorer parishioners, saw the dirt also, but, understanding better, was not offended at the sight.

There was no one in the street when they entered it. The day was raw and uninviting, and windows and doors were jealously closed against the wind. Beatrice detected no watching face at any window, nevertheless every now and again a door opened and some slatternly woman, conscious of hasty and futile attempts to tidy herself, appeared in the dingy aperture, and nodded with shy brusqueness in response to James' salutation. Occasionally a woman appeared with a child in her arms, and sometimes with one or more clinging about her skirts. They all, Beatrice observed on looking back, remained at their doors watchfully, or joined one another and stood grouped on the pavement staring after James and herself.

"Why do they watch us?" she asked.

"Do you mind?" He smiled down at her in some amusement. "It's you they are interested in—the stranger. They are doubtless curious to see where we are going. They are very jealous in this street of any favour shown to a neighbour."

"I suppose it is wrong of me," Beatrice said, "but these people repel me. I can't work up any enthusiasm for them, James."

"You don't know them," he answered—"that's why. You don't understand them. I admit the externals are not prepossessing. One has to inure oneself to dirt and ungraciousness and other evils before one can know these people. To know them is to understand them; and to understand them thoroughly is to like them."

"I hope you are not looking to me to grow to love them?" she said.

"No. Except for the Rogers, who live in that smaller cottage right at the end, I don't wish you to have anything to do with this street. It's altogether too rough and sordid for you. This is the slum of the parish, for which the tanyard is mainly responsible. They are birds of passage mostly. I want you to work only among the natives."

It was a relief to Beatrice to find that the Rogers' cottage looked out on one side at least upon green fields. A path through the fields, which James pointed out, would take her to the village, so that if she preferred the longer route she could avoid the way by which they had come.

"But you will never evade the watchful eye of Mrs.

Morey whether you come by the fields or by the road," he added, as he returned the determined greeting of a big, red-faced woman, who came to the entrance of the cottage adjoining the Rogers' which, like its neighbour, was smaller and older than the double row of brick houses that had sprung up of recent years, and from which these two stood detached with an air of refusing to acknowledge any connection with these newer residences.

Mrs. Morey was a woman who might have been any age rather than forty, which were all the years she reckoned. She was toothless, save for one abnormally long discoloured relict which, protruding in assertive isolation from the centre of the upper jaw, overlay the lower lip after the manner of some rare antique cunningly arranged for its better display to the public gaze. Someone had once suggested to Mrs. Morey a visit to the dentist for the improvement of her personal appearance by the removal of this unlovely memento of the past; but Mrs. Morey had quashed this idea. "Not me," she had said. "I likes to show it. Folks can't say I've got no teeth so long as they see that there one."

Mrs. Morey, having watched the visitors admitted to the Rogers' cottage, re-entered her own dwelling, grumbling and curious, and stood at the little front window and peeped over the blind for the double purpose of observing their coming forth, and of timing the length of their visit. The attention her neighbours received from the vicarage was a subject of complaint with her, as the delicacies which arrived from the

vicarage kitchen for the invalid's consumption were a source of envy.

When she followed her cousin into the living-room of the cottage, and looked round with wondering eyes upon the orderly little room which was the centre of this tiny home, Beatrice observed the invalid, whose bed had been brought in from the bedroom, and remained there placed before the window because it was more cheerful like, propped up with pillows busily making a shirt for her old man; while the old man himself sat before the fire, taking snuff, and reading to her from an old paper book the while she sewed. These occupations being interrupted by the visitors' entry, the old man, in a flutter of awkward pleasure, placed chairs for the newcomers, and, there being but two, hovered restlessly about the foot of the bed, reiterating at intervals his expressions of welcome.

"Didn' expect to see you to-day, sir. Caw bless thee heart! no;—did us, Ester? Pleased to see you always, sir—an' the young lady."

The old woman was manifestly more interested in Beatrice, and openly curious in regard to her. When James, standing by the bedside, introduced his cousin, the thin hand clasped the girl's, and the dim eyes raised to the fair young face grew yet more dim behind their rising tears.

"'Tis Mr. Ashleigh's young lady, for sure," she said.

Smiling, James turned aside and addressed himself to the husband, leaving Beatrice, flushed and embarrassed, yet inwardly amused, to correct the error; no

easy matter; the old lady, as James had surmised, was not very ready to be convinced.

"Not his young lady?" she ejaculated, in keen disappointment. "Aw, my dear, I never seed anyone before that was half good enough for Mr. Ashleigh; but you'm as beautiful as an angel. You be made for en. Ees, sure. Don't tell me. I knows. I could see it in his eye when he looked at you."

Beatrice gave it up, and sought to divert the old woman's attention by admiring her sewing.

"Ay. I'm leavin' en well provided," she explained. "'E won't 'ave no one to sew for en when I'm gone; so I reckon to make en enough to last his time. 'Twon't be long, 'e says, once I'm took. Nigh on fifty year we've been together. . . . It's hard after all those years when it comes to parting. But, if it wasn't for 'im, I'd be glad to go. I suffers cruel at times."

"I know," Beatrice answered. "It's wonderful to me to see you sitting up so brave and busy and bright. Mr. Ashleigh told me how wonderful you were. I think he thought you could give me a lesson in patience. I'm not brave over misfortune."

"You'm young, you see," the invalid replied. "'Tisn't fitty that the young should suffer. I'm upwards of seventy, an' that makes a diff'ence. 'Tis amost time these old bones were under the sods. You'm at the beginning o' life."

The old eyes fixed themselves wistfully on the girl's face.

"I wish you'd 'low you was Mr. Ashleigh's young lady," she said. "Don't seem I can see 'im marryin' anyone else."

Beatrice, meeting the anxious questioning of the searching eyes, shook her head.

"You mustn't think that," she said. "I'm his cousin. It's almost, you see, like brother and sister."

Mrs. Rogers, still manifestly unconvinced but persuaded that the young lady intended to remain close upon the subject, fell back on the exhaustless topic of her own happy marriage, and the children she had been blessed with and had since buried. It was clear to Beatrice that death to this optimistic soul represented a continuation of the present existence under improved conditions, and the reuniting of broken ties. Her purgatory lay in the brief period of separation from her old man; but she was as confident of meeting him later "up there" as she was that night must follow upon day, because it always did.

Beatrice left the cottage with this simple idea of theology engaging her attention. She wondered if James taught that childlike form of belief to the less imaginative of his flock. It savoured of the Christian Science idea of passing on into another room. Strange what diverse opinions people held of the great puzzle which is beyond the solution of mankind.

"I think, James," she said, and shot a demure look at him from under her lashes, "it will be less misleading if you leave me to work my district alone. The curate does not usually escort the parish worker on her rounds. Wedgemere has its traditions, like most places; and it is disconcerting when one blunders up against them unawares."

"I'm awfully sorry," he said. "But no one regards

Mrs. Rogers. She rides that hobby to death. You aren't vexed, really?"

"Not in the least. But I didn't convince her, you know."

"No," he returned; "you couldn't, because she doesn't wish to be convinced. We separate here—not," and he laughed quietly, "from motives of prudence; but I have a sick woman in this street to visit."

"I should have imagined," Beatrice answered, "that that was the doctor's affair."

"Some people," he replied, with the amused expression she so often called up upon his face, "like to see the parson too."

"The rich man sends for his lawyer," she retorted, "and the poor man for the clergy. There is an importance surrounding certain events which may not be ignored. Be patient with my levity, Jim, and direct me on my way."

James pointed to the path across the fields.

"You can't miss it," he said; "you have only to follow that. Keep straight ahead, and you come out by Tozer's, the grocer's shop in the Fore Street. Prospect Lane, where Narramore lives, is on your right as you go towards the church."

He opened the gate of the field for her, and stood for a moment beside it, looking after her as she walked rapidly along the narrow path. To follow the instructions was simple so long as it was a matter of keeping straight forward; but the fields were bisected by a lane, and beyond the lane the footpath across the further field reached a point midway where it bifurcated abruptly and led in opposite directions.

Beatrice paused by the stile leading into the lane and looked about her. Which path, she wondered, might be considered to lead straight ahead? It was a point which it seemed to her could be decided either way according to which direction one faced. While she rested there a girl approached, walking leisurely along the lane, carrying a trailing piece of ivy in her bare hand. The girl in the road looked up, and seeing the other girl at the stile paused involuntarily and stared at the beautiful face with surprised and unconscious rudeness.

"Can you," Beatrice asked on an impulse, "tell me which of these paths leads to the town?"

"That there one," the girl answered, and pointed to the left. "I'll go with you to the next field and put you in the way."

"But that's taking you out of your road," Beatrice protested.

"I ban't doin' nothin', only mooching round."

Beatrice glanced swiftly at the speaker. The girl was about her own age. She was pretty, with a rough, wind-blown comeliness that suggested days spent in the open air—the vagabondage of sunshine and rain and open hedgerows associated with the gipsy life. She was, as a matter of fact, the daughter of a small farmer, and worked on the farm like a man when it pleased her to work at all. Her hands were red and coarse. She wore no hat over her rough hair; and the eyes looking out from under this straggling thatch had the same half-bold, half-shy glance one sees in the eyes of a robin. Beatrice made up her mind

quickly, and, crossing the stile, stepped down into the road and stood beside this obliging young person.

"It's very kind of you," she said.

"You'm welcome," the girl answered, and opened the gate of the field to save the other the necessity of climbing the stile.

XIII

IT'S pretty here," Beatrice said, and stood for a moment to look about her across the undulating fields to the shadowy outline of the distant hills that, cloud-like, melted into the grey of the wind-swept sky. "It must be very beautiful in summer. Where does the other path lead?"

"To Merton," her conductor answered. "It takes you over the railway that runs through the coppice yonder. You can amost see the level crossing from here. It was this side the crossing that Mr. Toller's son was killed last year. Mr. Toller is the postmaster."

"Killed!" Beatrice repeated. "Do you mean that he was run over?"

"Yes. Went off 'is 'ead, some say, and wandered there in the night—walked across the fields, same as you and me might, an' put 'isself in front of the express. My father 'elped to pick en up. Twenty-one, 'e was."

"Oh!" Beatrice ejaculated, and looked through the bare tracery of the trees towards the level way. The calm, unemotional manner in which the girl described this tragic happening heightened, rather than depreciated from, its dramatic effect. "How terrible!" she said.

"Yes, 'twas. Smashed to bits, 'e was. They 'ad to

gather it up in a sack an' bury it where it was. Me an' some others went down to see what us could. It was all scatted about for ever so far."

Beatrice shivered and hurried on. The bald, yet vivid, word-painting conveyed to her imagination a realistic picture of this unnecessary tragedy whereby some suffering human soul had deliberately destroyed the gift of life. In the case of one demented the act is understandable, but, apart from that explanation, the life must be very hopeless that can seek violent dissolution.

"There!" said the girl, when they came to the end of the second field. "You'm all right now. This road leads into the Fore Street. You come out by the grocer's shop where the spirits is looking out at the corner."

She stopped and leaned on the stile and regarded Beatrice with keen, bright, admiring eyes.

"You'm Miss Ashleigh, ban't you?" she said. "I heard tell you was come to the vicarage."

"Why, yes," Beatrice said. "I think in return you should tell me your name."

"I'm Jenny Rossiter," the other replied, and made a motion with her head in the direction from whence she had come. "I lives to Barton's Farm. Mr. Ashleigh knows me all right."

Beatrice smiled a farewell.

"I'm very much obliged to you for directing me," she said. "Good afternoon, and thank you."

"Good afternoon, miss. You'm very welcome."

The girl remained at the gate, as James Ashleigh had remained at the other gate, and looked after the

graceful, well-tailored figure which, despite the quiet fashion of its clothes, presented by comparison with Wedgemere a modishness that provoked Jenny's envy, as it had provoked the criticism of the women gathered upon the pavement in the street through which she had passed that afternoon with James. The last thing that Beatrice would have conceived as likely was that these people should take a particular interest in the fashion of her garments.

Arrived at the grocer's shop, which her cousin as well as her late companion had emphasised as a landmark, the latter's cryptic reference to watchful spirits which had puzzled her at the time of its utterance became clear, a small side window being given exclusively to the exhibition of Gilbey's wines and spirits, which, arranged for their better display in seeming insecurity with red and gilded necks leaning towards the glass, did in reality convey an impression of furtive peeping which made the girl's remark peculiarly adroit. Beatrice turned the corner, and kept on until she came to Prospect Lane, which, if its title were not intentionally sarcastic, must have been named before the introduction of bricks and mortar had blocked out all possibility of any prospect whatsoever.

Old Narramore lived with a widower son and a lumpish granddaughter who was called Lizer, and who, having finished with school, kept house for her father and grandfather, and did it very badly. Lizer was inefficient in most things, but she was willing and good-tempered, two qualities which in certain opinions more than counterbalance a deficit in the virtue that is next in order to godliness. The latter virtue old

Narramore was fully persuaded was his peculiar inheritance. He was inclined to be insistent on his claim to this virtue, as though doubtful of its obviousness to the ordinary observer. He had impressed it on Miss Gervais so frequently that she had grown to regard him as quite a holy old person, and would not have thought of suggesting reading secular matter to him. She was even diffident about offering to read items of local interest from the Parish Magazine. Beatrice, ignorant of this commendable piety, had armed herself with the daily newspaper and the current number of *Punch*. She carried these in her hand when the amazed Lizer opened the door to her and showed her into the airless, stuffy little room where old Narramore sat, nursing the head of his stick as though he proposed going walking, while a round table, from which the white cloth which graced it usually for the saving of trouble had been removed and a red one substituted in honour of the expected visitor, was drawn close to the fire for the reader's greater comfort and convenience. On the red cloth reposed the Family Bible.

Mr. Narramore was expecting Miss Gervais. Miss Gervais' weekly visits were an institution. He had come through custom to regard them much in the same light in which a business man would regard the services of a paid secretary: he felt under no obligation; he was not particularly appreciative, but he would have felt injured had she for any reason discontinued her visits.

When Lizer threw open the door, and flattened herself against the wall with an effacing deference she

was not wont to show Miss Gervais, who usually let herself in, old Narramore brought his head round with a jerk, and catching sight of the radiant figure against the dingy background of drab-coloured wall, so utterly dissimilar to any other woman he had ever seen, yet gracious and girlish withal, he betrayed almost as great astonishment as his granddaughter had shown, and an almost equal deference.

Groaning, and with difficulty, he rose out of his chair and stood leaning on his stick and blinking at her. Miss Gervais would have begged him not to rise had he ever attempted to do so in her presence, but it did not occur to Beatrice to discourage his effort at politeness; the less one exercises the joints, the more readily they stiffen; therefore it is mistaken kindness to encourage sedentary habits.

"Good afternoon," she said, and held out her hand.

Being unversed in the etiquette of the district visitor, Beatrice obeyed her own impulses in the difficult question of procedure. Since impulse when dictated by a gentle nature is a reliable guide, she acted wisely in yielding to it. Mr. Narramore took the small hand, and, manifestly uncertain what to do with it, dropped it again, and with an even greater display of distress than he had shown in rising, lowered himself into his high-backed chair, from which stuffy haven he regarded her with mixed emotions and unqualified admiration.

Beatrice felt it necessary to explain herself.

"Miss Gervais asked me to call and express her regret that she is unable to come to-day for the reading. Mr. Gervais is ill with influenza, and she can-

not leave him. If you don't mind having me for a substitute, I shall be very pleased to read in her stead. I brought the newspaper with me, and a copy of *Punch*. There are some good jokes in *Punch*. I'll leave it behind so that you can look at the pictures."

The old man chuckled.

"Tom'll like they," he said. "Tom's my son, mum. He's all for jokes, Tom is. Miss Gervais reads from the 'Oly Word. I always reckons 'pon reading from the Book Thursdays."

"Why, so you shall, if you prefer it," Beatrice replied cheerfully as she sat down. "Wouldn't you like to have a little worldly news first?"

"As you please, mum," Mr. Narramore answered guardedly, and fixed his wistful old gaze upon the copy of *Punch*.

Beatrice pushed the Family Bible aside and spread her papers in its stead, and started tentatively upon the leading article. Mr. Narramore made no pretence of being interested; he was in certain respects embarrassingly honest.

"Be there no murders?" he interrupted her to inquire. And when she admitted that there was an account of some crime, and sought to dissuade him from his wish for sanguinary details by describing it as a painful and gruesome story, his face brightened with anticipatory enjoyment as he urged her to, "Read en up, mum—read en up. A good stirrin' murder case is what I likes."

There was, she decided, some reason for the restricted literary taste of a district visitor.

Beatrice read the murder case with conscientious

thoroughness; parts of the evidence she was obliged to read more than once. Old Narramore gloated over the details of the crime with an enjoyment that was unquestionable. When the case was disposed of, being left in the curiosity-provoking stage of an adjournment, he asked if there was not any further police court news. Beatrice, having searched the sheet for other evidence of the evil in human nature, and finding little more to whet the old man's lust for horrors, turned with relief to the brighter pages of *Punch*. *Punch* as a wit was a failure. If Mr. Narramore had ever appreciated a joke it was not of the quality which is issued from 10 Bouverie Street. He was not amused, and he made no effort to appear so.

"Tom'll like that there," was his sole comment.

"'E's a great one for jokes, Tom is."

Tom, Beatrice gathered from the old man's rambling confidences, was an unbeliever, and quite hardened in his scepticism and rather proud of his atheistical opinions. In an oddly inconsistent way old Narramore appeared rather proud himself of his son's unorthodox views.

"'E's up an' says to Mr. Ashleigh one day, when Mr. Ashleigh was in tellin' us 'bout heaven, 'Not meanin' to be disrespectful, sir, I don't believe a word of what you've been sayin',' he says. Mr. Ashleigh didn't seem to mind much. 'All right, Tom,' 'e says, pleasant like, 'you wait an' see.' Ay, I says to Tom, you wait, I says, till you gets t'other side; then you'll get a shock. An' so 'e will."

The old man spoke with the conviction of one to whom t'other side was a kind of glorified court of

justice, where the prosecuting counsel, in wings instead of a gown, confounded each comer with a detailed account of his individual and separate sins, and where prompt and relentless punishment followed immediately upon the indictment. He had no fears for himself in respect to t'other side, being firmly impressed with the belief that he had a free pass to heaven. But he was nervous about his dissolution.

"I do 'ope I'll go off easy like," he said, and looked at Beatrice questioningly as though he sought reassurance on this point. "I ban't afeard of t'other side, but I'm mortal scared o' dying. I'm all right for t'other side, I be. I'm a good man, an' always lived sober—never been what you might call drunk, an' never been in jail. 'Tisn' many can say that, mum."

"That must be an immense satisfaction to you," Beatrice said gravely.

"Ay," the old man replied; and if there was a tinge of regret in his tones for the joys which sobriety had denied him, there sounded also a ring of complacency. "It gives one a comfortable sort o' feelin' when one comes to think about one's end. If I was only sure now as I'd go off easy like, I'd feel all right."

It had grown too dark for reading. Beatrice might have made that an excuse for taking her leave; but inexplicably the old man's egotistical garrulity interested her. She endeavoured to soothe his very evident nervousness regarding his end, and almost persuaded him into believing that one who had lived so regular a life, and reached so ripe an age, would cross over t'other side quite easily in his sleep. He was

manifestly comforted. When she rose to go, and stood for a moment looking down on the seamed and thoughtful face in the glow of the firelight, she saw that it wore a more tranquil expression, while the old complacent gleam of the good man conscious of his worth had crept back into his eyes. A quiet conscience is a valuable possession when one comes to the evening of life, even if one has found it a dull companion earlier along the journey.

While she stood looking down at the old man the outer door opened noisily, and a big bass voice, which seemed to fill not only the narrow passage but the entire dwelling, shouted cheerfully for illumination.

"Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lizer!" chanted the irreverent voice.

"That's Tom," said the old man, and shook his head disapprovingly. "'E thinks Miss Gervais is here. Tom's set 'is face agin the church. 'E'll get a shock, 'e will, one day."

Whispering in the passage without succeeded, and then a heavy step going on tiptoe past the door, followed by the scarcely lighter footfall of Lizer, who, during the whispered conference, had given her parent information which reduced his cheerfully aggressive mood to a shamefaced desire to escape observation.

Beatrice emerged into the passage to find a smoking paraffin lamp alight on a bracket against the wall, and the frowsy Lizer waiting near the entrance to show her out. The master of the house had disappeared.

XIV

THE indisposition of Mr. Gervais was brief; therefore Beatrice's acquaintance with the Narramore *ménage* had no opportunity for development; Miss Gervais, like her brother, being intensely jealous of any interference in her particular department. Beatrice was aware of this jealousy, was aware that Mr. Gervais resented her popularity with the choir boys. She was now secretary to the cricket team, and the important-looking long green bag, in one end of which a large rent appealed mutely for attention which it promptly received on arrival at the vicarage, had been transferred from the care of Mr. Gervais to her charge.

"They suspected, I think, that I might let my Bible class have the use of it," he said, in explanation.

"I'm afraid the new secretary gained the position through bribery," the vicar remarked.

Beatrice protested with a laugh.

"I don't think that altogether nice of you," she said. "I've an idea that that half-crown is weighing on your mind."

"It has ceased to weigh on my pocket at any rate," he answered.

But he was pleased that she should take an interest in anything, even in the choir boys. He was always hoping that she would become reconciled to the

changes in her life, and grow to regard the new conditions favourably. She had fallen into place more readily than had been anticipated. In Mrs. Ashleigh's opinion, if it were not for the undesirable influence of the Lawrences and the frivolous distractions which they offered, Beatrice would settle down into the niche which, having no daughter of her own, had hitherto remained vacant, and which she appeared quite well qualified to fill. But the Lawrences were a link with the old life, and it was very apparent to Mrs. Ashleigh that her niece derived more pleasure from their society than from that of the quite worthy, if less enlivening, people who frequented the vicarage. Beatrice never appeared wholly at her ease with these people; they remained an insoluble drab mystery to her.

Drabest and dullest among them was the curate's sister, a narrow-minded little woman, with an incessant giggle and an awkward habit of jerking her shoulders when she talked. She was untidy in appearance, and her clothes conveyed, as her complexion did, the suggestion that they had been shut away from the light and air.

"It seems so funny," she remarked one evening to Beatrice, with the inevitable giggle, "to be interested in boys; they are so rude. My brother says it requires a man to manage them. I suppose you will take a boys' class in the Sunday school?"

"No," Beatrice answered. "I haven't any aptitude for teaching."

"Oh, but it's so easy!" Miss Gervais assured her. "We have books with the lessons set for us. There is no difficulty about it at all."

"That's quite a clever idea," Beatrice returned. "The books would fine it all down so. If I taught I should prefer to do without them. But my sphere of usefulness doesn't lie in that direction. I have never been inside a Sunday school in my life."

Miss Gervais' amazement at this admission was so genuine that Beatrice could not help laughing. The narrowing to mere pinpricks of the pupils of Miss Gervais' light eyes, a peculiarity which she had observed also in the brother's eyes, betrayed, besides amazement, aversion. It was evident that Miss Gervais did not like the vicar's niece, that her arrival at the vicarage spoilt things for her. Even in the matter of old Narramore, though this service had been undertaken at her request, the approval Beatrice had won from the old man, who in his enthusiasm had not been tactful when discussing her visit with the curate's sister, was a further vexation. Miss Gervais never divulged any part of that interview with old Narramore, during which he had insistently inquired whether the young lady who had come in to read to him was not a Real Lady, and, upon Miss Gervais' acknowledgment that she was, had replied with unflattering emphasis: "I knowed it. I knowed that at once. You can always tell her sort."

Miss Gervais turned and made an appeal to James.

"Can't you persuade her to help in the Sunday school?" she asked.

Beatrice looked round quickly.

"I didn't know you were there," she said.

"Oh, I've been here some while," he answered, as he came forward and joined them.

Observing his outward indifference; observing also Miss Gervais' coy glances, her shy, self-conscious air, and too evident desire to ingratiate, Beatrice found herself wondering whether James were as innocent of his fascination as he appeared. Miss Gervais was so obviously in love with him, and he seemed so entirely unaware.

"You ought to persuade Miss Ashleigh to take a class; we are so short handed," she persisted.

James ranged himself unexpectedly on his cousin's side.

"She's such a busy person," he replied. "Besides the work we find for her she discovers innumerable duties for herself. She is getting each one of us in hand. I don't think we can spare her to the Sunday school just yet."

Beatrice suddenly laughed. That was the only reference James had made to her remarks about his sermons. Had it not been for something in his look and intonation she might not have caught the reference even then.

"He means," she explained, taking note of Miss Gervais' uncomprehending expression, "that I have taken him in hand, and so haven't time for other boys."

Miss Gervais' wooden reception of this flippancy moved James to rescue the conversation from the danger of personalities and direct it into safer channels.

"How limited these specialised people become," Beatrice remarked to him later when Miss Gervais and her brother had left. They had been supping at the vicarage, and left early as a convalescent pre-

caution. "I hope you will never be so swathed in your profession, Jim, that you won't be able to breathe any broader atmosphere. They are not human, those two."

"You are a little prejudiced," he said. "You don't try to understand them."

Beatrice laughed wickedly.

"I rather fancy I understand her at least a lot better than you do," she retorted. "To quote old Narramore's warning to his son, 'You wait and see. You'll get a shock one day.'"

She stretched her arms above her head, stifling a yawn.

"Heavens! how tired these people make me!"

She and James were alone together in the drawing-room, sitting before the dying fire. Beatrice leaned back in a corner of the sofa and fell into a thoughtful mood, her brows puckered, her eyes on the fire which was getting low, but which no one replenished because Mrs. Ashleigh considered it wasteful to build up a big fire after a certain hour. If Beatrice complained of feeling chilly her aunt suggested a shawl, and remarked on the unwisdom of changing into a thin dress in the evening. Beatrice's simple black frock and the audacious crimson stockings were an offence to Mrs. Ashleigh.

Beatrice thrust the red stockings now nearer the fire, and bringing her eyes back to her cousin's face, surprised him looking at her with such grave intentness that she lifted inquiring brows. James removed his gaze and became instantly more alert.

"Little Hopkins is to be christened to-morrow," he

said. Then he laughed. "You'll accuse me next of not being able to keep clear of shop."

"I like that boy," Beatrice said. "He brought me the club funds this morning, and handed them over with the manner of one making a gift. When I proposed giving a receipt, he replied off-handedly: 'That's all right, m'm; you'm secretary and treasurer, you know.' I've a good mind to stand godmother to him."

James looked at her in surprise.

"I thought—I understood you regarded baptism in the light of an empty form," he said.

"And that disqualifies me, eh?"

"Well, yes; I think so."

"Why don't you attempt to convert me?" she asked.

James reddened.

"You'll hear the call one day," he replied quietly, and looked away from her mocking face.

"You are promising me a shock like Tom Narramore is threatened with," she said.

"No," he answered. "I believe you are nearer the truth than you realise."

"The truth!" she repeated, smiling faintly. "That is just what one cannot determine—the truth. One has ideas, but one cannot be sure. And there is such a complexity of opinion; it confuses. It's a case of many echoes. Religion is a voice which reaches the heart; the creeds and doctrines, wherewith men have sought to confuse religion, are merely echoes which bewilder the understanding."

"There is no bewilderment," he replied, "if one follows God's Word. Our Lord gave us the creed. That

is not an echo; it is The Voice. Religion is the Word."

She shook her head, not so much in disagreement as admitting the uselessness of argument.

"It is just as one views things," she said. "To me religion is an ideal which one fixes in the mind and endeavours conscientiously to live up to. It is the little pocket edition of religion which people carry about with them that I cannot get on with. It's not big enough to fit its subject. Whether there is a future life I do not know; neither does anyone, although many assert they do."

"Well, of course," James answered quietly, "the whole question rests on belief in the Bible. If you discredit God's Word, there is no evidence of a future life, nor of anything else that is not purely material. In my case—in the case, I hope, of the majority—the Bible, the chronicle of the life and teachings of our Lord, is unquestionable. The Word of God testifies to the Truth."

"That's faith," she insisted, "not knowledge."

"That's according how you look at it," he said. "In my opinion, *we* have knowledge with faith; it is *you* who are unenlightened."

She smiled gravely.

"I can't catch hold of your idea," she said. "I've been brought up to think of the Bible as a laborious compilation of legends and hearsay histories of primitive peoples, a few of whom thought in advance of their time, and whose thoughts have lived after them as what is worthy to live usually survives. But there is much that has survived too long. It has ceased to

convince, and becomes ridiculous. The story of the creation—the miracles. . . . Faith would require to be blind to reason before one believed these things.”

“One has to accept much without understanding; and parts of the Bible are pure allegory; a literal interpretation is impossible. The human mind is incapable of grasping these things. But we have our Lord’s example and commands. We must either obey or disobey, believe or deny.”

“And to deny, from the theologians’ point of view, means the death of the soul?”

“The soul is in God’s hands,” James answered, with grave earnestness. “No man can claim to know what His will is. Scepticism is a part of the age. It’s an age of freedom. Men and women want to be free—free to act and think as they like—free from religion.”

“Not free from religion,” Beatrice objected—“religion is a part of ourselves—it’s the spiritual element in man—free from the creeds, the different doctrines. It’s the intolerance of doctrine that offends—the discredit which one church throws on the teaching of the rest. You can none of you be altogether right, even if none of you are altogether wrong. It is like different members of a family disputing as to the correct way in which to revere their parent. It’s absurd, you see—it’s mischievous.”

James’ eyes saddened. She had dragged an ugly truth into the light, and it hurt him to have to face it.

“So long as the church is divided against itself, so long as one denomination wars against another, the scoffer will ever find an opening for attack,” he said. “You are right, unfortunately. Being merely

human, we cannot all think alike, but we could at least respect one another's opinions. There are a dozen different kinds of Christianity fighting against each other. God forgive us! This civil war in Christ's Church does incalculable harm. But though it hinders the work, it cannot stop it; for it is God's work, and so it is bound to succeed."

"I wonder!" Beatrice sat forward and stared at the dull embers and reflected awhile. "Voltaire wrote that, 'Dunces are the founders of all religions, men of wit founders of heresies, men of understanding laugh at both.'"

She looked round quickly and detected the pain in James' face, and regretted having said that.

"That's one man's opinion based on his own crooked outlook on life," James said.

"Yes," she allowed. "That's intolerance too—the intolerance of the sceptic."

He got up and stood over her, very grave, very earnest, almost, it seemed to her, appealing.

"Do not be hardened in your unbelief," he said. "Keep an open mind, and the light will flow in."

"I do keep an open mind," she said. "I believe in the God in man—in the triumph of good over evil—in the power and the divinity of good. For the rest I am quite content to leave the mystery of the future to the future's unveiling. I am fully convinced in my own mind that you are no nearer the truth than I."

XV

AT the back of Beatrice's mind a conviction held that neither her uncle nor James had any intention of attacking her unbelief, or of seeking directly to influence her thought. This, she felt, was from no want of confidence in the unassailable strength of their position, but was the result of a settled belief in the efficacy of prayer and example, and a perfect faith in the power of God to win to Himself any soul that walked in the shade of doubt. That was their belief. She realised that they respected honest doubt as she respected their quite honest conviction. She felt that they were sincere, these earnest simple souls who believed without questioning this enigmatic faith, so incomprehensible to the doubter's inquiring mind. In return for their consideration, their patient and helpful tolerance, she adapted herself as far as it lay in her power to their mode of living, not only in regard to the social work of the parish, but in the matter of religious observance. In a letter which she wrote later to Charlie she stated that she was making up for the defection of the past years by a double attendance at church. Also she helped to decorate the altar; possibly in time she would undertake the brasses and wash the fair linen.

"Come down in the vac," she finished, "and behold for yourself."

To which Charlie replied with laconic eloquence:

"I knew it. All right; I'll come. I feel curious. What's James like?"

Beatrice laughed over this question, and in her next letter made a point of answering it.

"James is very near perfection," she wrote.

James was, as a matter of fact, regarded in the parish as near to perfection as a man can attain to. Mr. Gervais was respected, and the old vicar was beloved; but James had a worshipful following, particularly among the old and sick. This was not surprising, since wherever there was sadness he carried such a wealth of cheery optimism, of almost womanly sympathy, that he seldom visited a home without leaving it the brighter for his presence. Old eyes turned to him always with a smiling welcome, and looked after him with regret when he went away. He might pardonably, Beatrice reflected, have grown vain. That he was not vain was a further proof of solid worth.

Many things astonished her in connection with her cousin. Conditions which would have appealed to her as unmanly in other men, which she could not have conceived her own brothers fulfilling, appeared suitable as undertaken by James. He fitted in. In no circumstance did she see him at a disadvantage; even on the occasion of a mothers' meeting, which she attended because Mrs. Ashleigh was of the opinion that it would make an agreeable change for her, and which James attended because she asked him to see her through.

"You need not go unless you wish," Mrs. Ashleigh said. "I proposed it thinking you might find it amusing. I used to at your age."

"My dear mother," James put in, "you do still."

It was then Beatrice proffered her request.

"Do you ever attend mothers' meetings, Jim?" she asked.

He laughed, and admitted that he did occasionally.

"Then come to-morrow, and help me nurse the babies."

"There won't be many babies present," Mrs. Ashleigh replied, pausing in her occupation of sorting magazines to look reprovingly at her niece. "I wish you would check yourself of that foolish habit of abbreviating names. I dislike hearing you address your cousin as Jim."

Beatrice flushed. She felt annoyed. Her aunt's habit of going bluntly for her point was disconcerting. But catching James' eye, she detected in it a gleam of such quiet amusement that her resentment lessened. After all, the objection was reasonable; a person should be called by the name in which he is baptized.

The mothers' meeting was about the dullest form of entertainment at which Beatrice had assisted so far. It was an amazingly obstetric gathering. And the limitless capacity for swallowing tea was almost as remarkable as the tireless energy which characterised the discussion of the delicate and intimate matters of greatest domestic interest. The frankness with which symptoms were described was embarrassing to anyone unversed in these things. The act of suffering, like the relation of these physical distresses, seemed to confer a sort of distinction. The air was redolent of buns and hot tea and soap and cheap dyes—all

good things in their way, but not pleasant to be shut in with; though, as a matter of fact, no one appeared to be inconvenienced except Beatrice, who quite early in the afternoon developed a headache. And James, though he kept his word as far as looking in at the meeting went, failed her. He did not stay. He was called elsewhere, and only dropped in to inform her that he could not attend as promised.

He made his way to her as quickly as he could; but he was detained many times during his progress through the room. Beatrice, seated on a form with a baby on her knee, observed his interrupted advance with interest; and when, having gained her side, he stood looking down at her and at the baby in her arms, she met his friendly eyes with a deprecating smile.

"This isn't my job," she said.

"No!" he returned. "You appear to be getting on famously."

"I'm merely posing," she replied, and glanced at the child with a vexed little laugh. "I picked out this one because it was daintier than the rest—and cleaner. I'm snobbish, you see. Look at Aunt Marion—nursing that horrid little imbecile, and delighting in all the children. I can't get up a show of interest even."

James' glance followed hers to where his mother sat surrounded with slobbering babies, amusing them and the women near her; and his face, turned towards the homely picture, brightened.

"She's an old hand at it," he observed.

"There is more in it than that," she responded. "She's interested in them."

"It would be odd if she wasn't, seeing she is a mother herself," he replied. "You look a bit tired. I would offer to take that baby from you, only I can't stay. I looked in because I knew you would be expecting me. But I have been sent for to christen a poor little mite whose brief earthly pilgrimage is nearly over. They don't expect it to live through the night."

"To christen it!" she echoed. Involuntarily she looked down at the healthy little form in her arms and gathered it closer to her. "Don't you think it is a pity to worry it when it is dying, James?"

"Worry it?" he repeated, his earnest eyes on her face. "Christ wants each of His little ones to bear His sign."

"Won't you have a cup of tea, Mr. Ashleigh?" exclaimed Miss Gervais' high-pitched voice at his elbow with the accompanying giggle. "I've a nice cup over here that I made expressly for you."

"I can't stay," he answered. "I'm sorry; but I really must not spare another minute. It's awfully kind of you to have bothered."

"But one cup of tea . . ." she urged.

"Drink it for me," he pleaded. "And come and steer me through the room so that I can get away quickly."

Beatrice smiled to herself as she watched Miss Gervais in ready response to this request conduct him to the exit. James had a facile way of gaining his point.

The headache developed as the afternoon wore on; but she stayed till the finish, and drove back with her aunt in the pony carriage which met them, not so much

for their convenience as for purposes of transport. It had made the journey earlier with heavy baskets, which it carried back now considerably lighter but quite as cumbersome. They occupied most of the room. Mrs. Ashleigh sat on one of these because the seat was unavailable. The sole seating space was given up to Beatrice, who drove, Hurden being deposed and told off for portage work.

"I'm always glad to get rid of him," Mrs. Ashleigh observed. "He's not a comfortable person to have close to one. I must really tell Mary to inform him that he must wash his ears. Drive quickly, Beatrice. It will be a rush as it is to be in time for service."

Beatrice, to whom the day of the week was thus unexpectedly recalled, frowned with irritation at being reminded of an unwelcome fact.

"I had forgotten it was church night," she said, urging the reluctant pony to a slightly smarter pace. "I think, if you don't mind, I'll stay at home this evening."

"Aren't you well?" asked Mrs. Ashleigh quickly.

Only indisposition excused in Mrs. Ashleigh's opinion any slackness in attendance at church. Beatrice had, during the months she had been at the vicarage, conscientiously endeavoured to meet her relations' views in this matter; but to-day her endurance had reached its limit.

"I'm tired and headachy," she returned wearily.

"But it isn't any distance to walk. When I am really tired, I find church the most restful place."

"Do you?" Beatrice's tone expressed wonderment.

"It doesn't rest me. One has to stand up when one would rather remain seated, and kneel when one isn't inclined towards kneeling. I just want to curl up on the sofa all the evening."

"I suppose," Mrs. Ashleigh observed, with a laudable attempt at sympathetic apprehension, "it is because you aren't used to this sort of thing. I am so accustomed to it that it doesn't tire my brain, only my feet; and fortunately they are large and can stand it."

Beatrice was not pleased with her triumph when she had won it. She felt, although nothing further was said, that her decision met with disfavour. Mrs. Ashleigh expressed surprise when she came downstairs after having changed her dress; and remarked on the change which she appeared to consider unnecessary.

"I wonder you troubled when you are so tired," she said.

"But," Beatrice returned, surprised, "it is so much more comfortable to get into fresh things."

It was a relief to be at last alone. When the hall door closed behind her aunt, and shortly afterwards the church bell ceased to ring, she settled herself on a sofa with a book Enid Lawrence had lent her, and tried to get away in mind at least from immediate things. And there, when he got back from church, James found her. She had not seen him since the afternoon; he had not been in for supper. There was nothing remarkable in that; he frequently missed his meals, or took them at odd hours. He went direct to the drawing-room on entering, and approached the

sofa. Beatrice put down her book, and stirred lazily without getting up. James regarded her attentively.

"I looked over to your seat this evening," he said, "and missed you."

"That's rather an obvious remark, James, since I wasn't there," she returned, smiling.

"I wondered," he said. "I felt—anxious."

"Good gracious!" She sat up straighter and frowned at him and laughed. "All this because I stayed away from service!"

"I thought perhaps this afternoon had knocked you up," he said. "The room was close."

"It was. It was also an irritating mixture of scents. But I can endure more than you give me credit for. I was lazy, that's all. Tell me about the christening. Is the poor little baby dead?"

"No," he answered, his face taking on a look of pleased interest. "I intended to tell you about that. It was a most wonderful thing. As I was in the act of making the Sign on the little forehead a great change came over the tiny face—I can't explain it; it seemed just to light up. I fetched the doctor to it later, and he said it was a most unexpected turn. He believes now it will pull through."

He was looking at her with eyes that were eager and glad and expectant. Beatrice met their clear gaze, smiling a little maliciously.

"Cold-water shock," she returned, damping his gladness. "One hears of these things. There isn't anything miraculous about it."

He turned away and crossed to the fire.

"I'm glad it's going to live, though. I've been

feeling quite depressed about it. What did you christen it?"

"Beatrice," he answered, without turning round.

"Beatrice!" She showed surprise. "Who gave it that name?"

"I did. No one had thought of a name, and that occurred to me. Do you mind?"

"No," she replied. "But it wouldn't alter the case if I did. You are an amazing person, James."

"I believed she was dying," he explained simply, "and—I wished her to bear that name straight back to God unsoiled."

"Ah!" she said softly.

She got up and crossed the room and stood beside him.

"I have been inconsiderate," she said. "I have vexed you. James, I am a horrid person."

For a space he looked down at her without speaking, faintly amused; the shadow had left his face.

"I think you are rather nice," he said then; whereat they laughed.

XVI

THE cold of winter which had overstepped its limits did not so much glide into summer through the intermediate passage of the spring as leap over that pleasing neutral zone, making up for its laggard going by its hurried mode of egress. Life passed so evenly at the vicarage, with days so filled and yet so uneventful, that the changing of the months was unremarked by Beatrice, who felt that she had lived years rather than months in Wedgemere. The old life with her father was as a dream which faded with her reluctant waking, as another dream had faded, and left her dissatisfied and lonely amid the uncongenial realities of existence shorn of romance. The fairest and most satisfying quality in life is its romance: denude the liver of all else and leave with him this appreciation, and he may still enjoy.

With the warmer days, with the unfolding of summer, the bursting into leaf of trees and the blossoming of flowers, the beauty of the country gripped Beatrice and added a new pleasure to her life. Also the fine weather found her busier. She arranged, and sometimes attended, her team's cricket matches, settled disputes between the boys, and organised meetings. And she had now quite a number of houses on her visiting list—cases in which James had solicited her help; and one or two she had undertaken on her

own account because of her interest in the people, or because they demanded, as Mrs. Morey did in a contentious spirit, to know why other folk should receive all the attention. Mrs. Morey was exacting, and possessed of a jealous temperament; but there was a rugged honesty about her which Beatrice liked.

"You go in there twice," she complained, with a nod of her head in the direction of the Rogers' cottage, "to every once you come in yere."

"Yes," Beatrice admitted. "But she is so dependent on people visiting her; she can't get about like you."

"Gettin' about isn't everything," Mrs. Morey contended.

"It enables you to go and see your neighbours, doesn't it?"

"Neighbours!" Mrs. Morey's voice was one note of intense scorn. She made an expressive gesture that indicated and dismissed in the same movement the long narrow street with its row of uniform dwellings. "I don't call them neighbours—livers-by, that's what they be. I keep myself to myself. Mis' Rogers is the only one I visits; an' I only go in there because 'er's so dependent, and 'er man's a feckless fool. I'm promised to lay 'er out when 'er time comes. 'Twon't be long now, I reckon. 'Er foot dropped off yesterday. The old man buried it in the garden in a pudding basin with a second basin atop, so that when 'er's dead it can be put in the coffin along with 'er; then all of 'er'll be buried together like. 'E studies 'er winderful."

And Beatrice, who at one time would have shrunk from, and felt sickened by these details, listened with

feelings alternating between pained sympathy and a wondering admiration for this example of tender love. In the possession of a love which had borne the burden of nearly half a century, and which was as strong in sickness as in health and even more patient, the dying woman enjoyed a priceless treasure.

This realising other people's lives, their sorrows with their more rare and less enduring happiness, was a new experience for her, an experience which widened the sympathies, and diverted her mind from its pre-occupation with her private griefs.

On leaving the Rogers' cottage, where she was now a regular and welcome visitor, Beatrice came out upon Enid Lawrence driving alone in a two-seater car. The car stopped at sight of her, and Beatrice got in.

"Doing my district, you see?" she said.

The other girl nodded.

"Overdoing it, aren't you?"

"I don't think so."

"People say so—a few—the spiteful ones. They say you are courting the curate."

"Percival?" Beatrice asked.

"No; your cousin."

"Oh, James!" She emitted a little laugh, and was silent for a space. Then she asked: "Do you think I should make a good clergyman's wife?"

"Not particularly. It isn't your *métier*. You know you look absurdly incongruous going into these cottages—something like Greuze's 'La Laitierre,' who certainly never got beyond posing as selling milk."

"You think I'm posing?"

"No; I didn't mean that. But it wears that appearance. You are too smart somehow in the rôle."

"Smart!" Beatrice laughed and looked at her neat serge costume.

"Oh, I know you're all right," Enid returned, laughing too. "It's your tailor. You make the rest of us look countrified. Wedgemere has a fashion of its own, the principal virtue of which is steadfastness. When tight skirts came in, it ignored them. But the tight skirt is nearly done; and when our garments widen then Wedgemere will be in advance of fashion."

"I think I rather admire that spirit in Wedgemere," Beatrice returned. "Fashion, after all, isn't of vital importance. I want to cultivate that idea, because, you see, I've got to."

"Otherwise you wouldn't."

"Otherwise I wouldn't."

"Have you finished your district for to-day?" Enid asked, as she turned the corner. "Because if so come back and have tea with me."

"I'd like to, but I have a meeting on at five."

"A meeting of what?"

"The choir cricket team. We have to arrange a fixture for Saturday. I'm afraid I must be there."

"Bother! Well, come to lunch to-morrow and spend the afternoon. If it wasn't for a certain happy vein of frivolity in your composition I'd have qualms about your future. You take your duties so seriously, you really might be qualifying."

"For what?"

"The position of a clergyman's wife."

Beatrice turned her head slowly and looked at the speaker.

"I wish you wouldn't say those things," she said—"even in jest."

"I'm not jesting. I'm merely repeating local gossip. I don't believe it myself. But you know what these country places are like."

"That's just it," Beatrice replied; "I don't know anything about country places."

"Well, for the matter of that," Enid returned, "the big towns are pretty much the same, only one doesn't hear the gossip. I think it is just as well to know what is being said, don't you?"

If Beatrice entertained any doubts on this point these resolved themselves later when Enid left her at the vicarage gate and drove off in a whirl of dust that quickly hid her from view, and as quickly subsided again, powdering the evergreens in the gardens of the square about the church. As Beatrice entered the vicarage gate the front door opened and James came forth. Absurd though she knew it to be, she felt her colour rising at sight of him; an odd embarrassment seized her, which was all the more disconcerting because it was so utterly without cause; she had never felt self-conscious in her cousin's presence before. James noticed nothing. If he saw her heightened colour it would never have occurred to him to connect it with himself. He appeared pleased to see her.

"Hallo!" he said. "You back! I'm just off to the workhouse. Will you come?"

She shook her head.

"I've my meeting at five."

"Well, walk part of the way with me," he urged.

"I'm tired," she replied untruthfully, and passed him on the steps and went indoors.

He looked after her, a little perplexed and hesitating, seeming half inclined to follow her into the house; then abruptly he ran down the steps, went out through the gate, and pursued his solitary way to the union in a thoughtful mood.

When they met again at supper, Beatrice had got over her embarrassment. It had not lasted long, and had been the result of the sudden surprise of seeing him following upon Enid's intelligence. On reflection, the whole matter occurred to her as rather trivial. She had an idea that if she repeated the gossip to James he would laugh. She decided to repeat it; she wanted to hear him laugh over it, wanted to laugh with him. When he came to her after supper, as he usually did on his free evenings with a request for music, she would tell him what was being said about them while he turned the music for her and leaned against the piano and joined in the songs. It would amuse him. They had both felt amusement at Mrs. Rogers' insistence on the same subject.

But James did not go to the drawing-room; he said something about his sermon, and disappeared in the direction of the study. The vicar was out; and Mrs. Ashleigh, armed with large scissors and a bale of unbleached calico, claimed Beatrice's help in cutting out garments for the work-guild as soon as the table was cleared. It was tedious work; and the scissors hurt her hand; the smell of the calico, too, was

unpleasant. But she made no complaint; experience had taught her the futility of protesting against any occupation with no more reasonable grounds for objecting than disinclination for the work. These things had to be done. Later she would be expected to attend the work meeting and help to fashion the stuff into garments in accordance with the conventional muddle whereby one set of persons undertakes to work for another set with no sort of obligation whatever other than the law of custom which inevitably makes for the teaching of mutual dependence. Beatrice disliked this side of the life. Mrs. Ashleigh's obsession for occupying all her time and that of other people worried her. The pleasure of being idle was a joy unknown to her aunt.

She escaped as soon as possible, and slipped out through the side door into the garden. The air was warm, and a young moon shone brightly above the feathery darkness of the deodars on the lawn. Beatrice drew in the scented air appreciatively, and ran down the grassy slope on to the tennis court. In one corner of the ground stood a rustic summer house, where Mrs. Ashleigh dispensed tea on the important occasions of the vicarage annual garden party. Beatrice had believed that she was alone in the garden, but as she approached nearer to the summer house a voice issuing from the darkened interior so startled her that she paused abruptly in her advance and stood still on the lawn and listened.

"Because you know something to a man's discredit, is that any reason why you should blazon it abroad?"

It was her cousin's voice. At first she imagined

he was speaking to someone; but, as the voice continued in a level monotone without pausing for any response, she grasped that it was not addressing itself to an individual listener but to an imaginary congregation. James was declaiming the sermon he intended to preach on the forthcoming Sunday.

Deliberately she remained still and listened, a little touched that he should have overcome his prejudices to the extent of following advice which had been distasteful to him, even repellant; keenly critical also, and fully alive to certain defects in the style of his delivery. That he had taken to writing his sermons as she had suggested was known to her, but until she heard him she had not suspected that he had adopted the further advice to declaim them in advance for the improvement of his delivery. Realising, as she did, the effort it must have cost him to subdue his dislike to this course, it was natural that a thrill of gratified pleasure should move her, while she stood in the white light of the moon listening to the very excellent sermon which James preached in the little dark summer house in the far corner of the lawn.

Whether instinct warned him that he had a listener, or whether, glancing inadvertently in her direction, he saw her standing there, Beatrice could not determine; but she knew when he caught sight of her. He came to the door of the summer house and remained in the aperture, looking out at her where she stood bathed in moonlight, long black shadows staining the ground behind her cast by the trees upon the mossy sward. The pale sheen of the moon was in her hair, and her face, white and dim of outline,

looked back at him, the eyes, darker shadows in their shadowy setting, lifted to his face.

"I didn't know you were here," she said. "I never thought that—that . . ."

"That I would get my sermons up?" he suggested, with a faint smile.

Beatrice moved forward quickly to his side.

"You are a dear," she said, and tucked her hand within his arm.

James gazed down at her, and though the smile lingered in his eyes, the rest of his face was grave.

"I don't think the result justifies the endeavour," he said. "The art of persuasive oratory is lacking in me."

"Oh! you have the persuasive art all right," she returned. "What you lack can be acquired. It's a matter of elocution. I wish you would let me help."

"Where did you learn how to preach sermons?" he asked, with a touch of satire.

Beatrice detected the satire and laughed softly.

"By noticing how badly many clergymen do it," she replied swiftly.

James echoed her laugh.

"At least," he said, "you have had experience of that nature here. But you incline to exaggerate the importance of a sermon. It is not the sermon but the gathering together in prayer which is of highest spiritual significance. It is the act of uniting in prayer which brings us close to God."

"That depends upon the point of view, I imagine," she replied. "Anyway, it is the sermon and not the prayers that one discusses. It's what you say in the

pulpit, James, that knocks chunks off one, as Charlie would express it. You hit out straight, and you get there every time."

James' only response was to draw her hand further through his arm and start to walk back to the house. And Beatrice, keeping pace with his leisurely step, and feeling his close contact and the strong pressure of his arm, decided against confiding Enid's chatter to him in the expectation of hearing him laugh. After all, James might not see in it anything to laugh at.

XVII

ONCE informed of the gossip that was being circulated coupling her name with her cousin's, Beatrice had little difficulty in tracing it to its source. Miss Gervais, ill-balanced in mind and possessed of a natural tendency towards making mischief, was in a spirit of bitter jealousy meanly insinuating that Beatrice was pursuing her cousin with unwelcome attentions. This disturbed Beatrice only in as far as she feared that James might hear of it and be annoyed. To tell James herself as a joke was quite another matter. And yet she found that for some inexplicable reason she could not tell James. He was so simply sincere that she felt he would realise merely the bad taste of the joke, and lose the point altogether. She rather inclined to lose the point herself at times before Miss Gervais' irritating mode of attack; and on one occasion she lost her temper, which was a matter of extreme mortification to her afterwards. That occasion was the day of the Sunday-school treat; and her irritability was possibly largely due to the vexations of the weather; the fine spell breaking unexpectedly early in the afternoon as the long procession of children filed from the schoolroom to the church for the short service before going up to the field.

Hurden, who was to drive Mrs. Ashleigh and a hamper of crockery to the ground, and who wore

his best suit in honour of the day, went about the business of harnessing the pony with a mind detached from the matter in hand, and an attentive eye on the horizon where a solitary cloud showed no bigger than a handkerchief, a black smudge on the unstained blue of the sky. The little cloud grew bigger and gathered others to it, and the air became slightly chilly. Hurden started to whistle softly with a note of growing confidence, and the satisfied expression of the person whose opinion is about to be substantiated settled upon his heavy features.

"I told 'er it would rain o' Toosday," he muttered.

"What's that?" demanded Mrs. Ashleigh's cook, entering the yard with a couple of kettles in her hands, which she proceeded to stow beneath the seat of the carriage. "Who says it's going to rain?"

"I do. I told Miss Ashleigh three days since it'ud rain o' Toosday; an' it's going to."

"Stuff and nonsense!" Mary retorted. "The glass is too high for that."

"That's what she said," Hurden answered unmoved. "'The barometer's too steady,' she says. 'Why do you think it'll rain?' she says. It always rains when we haves our treat, I says. An' so it do. She laughed; now she'll see who's right.

"'It won't rain this time,' she says. If it don't rain here it'll rain somewhere else, I says. It always do. But she kep' on laughing. You see, I says, it'll rain o' Toosday. An' it's goin' to rain. I can smell it coming."

"Well, it won't hurt you to be caught in it," Mary retorted. "Pity it don't rain soapsuds. The mistress

told me to tell you if you won't wash your ears she'll take you to the pump herself and scrub them with a scrubbing-brush."

Hurden looked indignant.

"I do wash my years," he replied, flushing dully. "I washes 'em every day. I washes my feet too o' Saturday nights."

"Wash your feet!" Mary ejaculated. "Don't you have a bath?"

"Wot, me?" he exclaimed, and stared at her in amazed offence. . . . "Take off my shirt an' get in altogetther? . . . Why, I'm much too big for that."

"Dirty young toad, you," she replied, with unaffected disapproval. "The master and Mr. James haves a bath every mornin'."

Which information Hurden received in shocked and incredulous silence. The Saturday night bath, like kneeling at one's mother's knee with folded hands before going to bed, was a part of childhood's tribulations. He had dispensed with those indignities long ago.

The first heavy drops of rain fell while he backed the pony between the shafts, descending like reluctant forerunners in large uncertain drops, and ceasing awhile as if loth to spoil the sunny brightness of the day. Before the children were well under cover in the church it had settled its indecision and was coming down in a steady, insistent manner that gave so little promise of lessening that Mrs. Ashleigh, looking upon the prospect and then at the lightly clad children, debated whether it would not be prudent to postpone the fête.

"I don't see how that can be," the superintendent of the girl's Sunday school observed, "with all the food provided."

Mrs. Ashleigh set this argument aside in her decisive, downright way, which so often caused offence without intention.

"It's not to be thought of that the children should risk pneumonia for the sake of a few buns," she said. "But this rain is so heavy, it may exhaust itself soon. We'll see whether it clears after the service. No one wants to disappoint them without sufficient reason."

She looked along the well-filled pews, crowded with rustling, expectant children; little girls with damp white frocks, and pleased yet anxious faces beneath their Sunday hats; boys more serviceably clad, whose beaming shiny faces suggested recent ablutions; and babies of both sexes, happy and stolid, but all interested, all intent and pleasantly excited. To disappoint these eager children was a measure to be resorted to only as a last extremity.

And then suddenly the organ pealed forth. The rustling, the continuous low hum of suppressed talking, became merged in one concerted movement, in a combined effort of sound: above the beating of the rain against the stained windows, in defiance of the lowering sky and the sodden ground beneath, the lusty young voices, upraised in shrill accord, sang with childish disregard for the inappropriate:

"There's a Friend for little children
Above the bright blue sky . . ."

Beatrice wondered whether a sense of humour, or an utter lack of that quality, were responsible for the selection of the hymn.

Later, between the showers, with band playing and banners waving dispiritedly in the intermittent sunshine, the procession trailed with determined cheerfulness through the muddy streets to the field. James threw out the suggestion to his cousin that she would be well advised to drive to the ground with his mother; but Beatrice declared in favour of walking with the procession. It gave her an impression, she confided to him afterwards, of being a member of the Salvation Army.

"I am afraid it will be damp in the field," Miss Gervais ventured brilliantly, regarding with mild surprise the water that ran down the sides of the road in muddy rivulets.

The idea apparently had not occurred to her before. Beatrice, who walked beside her behind her small class, was immediately reminded of the convincing remark of another person whose intelligence matched that of Miss Gervais: "It'll rain o' Toosday; it always do when we haves our treat." Results had justified Hurden's prediction; it seemed quite possible that Miss Gervais' statement would be fulfilled likewise.

The only thing to do, Mrs. Ashleigh affirmed, was to give the children tea while they were dry and then keep them moving about.

As a first impression of a school treat Beatrice saw very little that could be called attractive about the entertainment. She helped to organise games for the smaller children, and untied the draggled ribbons

of the maypole, the dancing round which was one of the features of the fête. James was starting races for the lads of his Bible class in the lower corner of the field. She stood for a while and watched him, unconscious that she in turn was being watched and her interest in the boys' races commented on. James and his boys, she reflected, notwithstanding that they had the worst part of the ground, seemed to be having quite a good time.

Miss Gervais came and stood beside her.

"Mr. Ashleigh is down there in the corner of the field," she said.

"So I see," Beatrice answered, without moving.

Miss Gervais giggled.

"I wonder you don't go and help him with his Bible class," she observed.

Beatrice turned her head deliberately and looked at the speaker, looked into the light eyes where lurked a spiteful malice which the warped nature could not repress; and she felt her anger rising.

"Do you think he looks as though he needed help?" she asked.

"I didn't know," Miss Gervais responded vaguely. "You're so fond of boys; I thought you would prefer to be with them."

She turned away as she spoke, and went back to her stolid infants, who were anxiously waiting for teacher to start their races, and to award the prizes and little bags of sweets; while Beatrice, moved only by a desire to avoid her neighbourhood, returned to the maypole and the dancing; and, standing about on the wet grass, realised, before James called her notice

to the fact, that her shoes were unsuited to the occasion. James came across to her during the afternoon and remonstrated with her in regard to her footwear.

"You'll take cold," he said. "Don't you think you had better go home and change? Those shoes are too thin. They must be wet through."

Aware that Miss Gervais had approached near to them and was listening, Beatrice felt vexed that he should draw attention to the unsuitability of her shoes. It was a reflection on her common sense.

"Suppose we all waxed timorous and went home to change?" she said impatiently.

"Most of us have come better prepared," he answered. "I believe I should be safe in asserting that your stockings are wet."

She flushed with increasing annoyance; and Miss Gervais, her feet sensibly shod in large boots, stout of sole and with patched uppers, giggled foolishly.

"It was so very fine this morning," she observed. "Perhaps Miss Ashleigh didn't expect rain."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous!" Beatrice said to her cousin. "Hobnails are not alone impervious to damp. My shoes are more serviceable than you imagine."

"I hope they are more serviceable than they look," he replied coolly. "Anyway, my mother is leaving shortly—I wish you would drive back with her."

"I am going back with the procession," she answered in a tone of finality that ended the discussion. "I am not in the least afraid of wet grass."

Further showers during the afternoon brought the proceedings to an early finish. It was a dragged pro-

cession that returned from the field and halted in the Square to sing the National Anthem and give three cheers before dispersing. Why they cheered, unless moved to follow blindly a time-honoured precedent, was a matter for speculation. Plainly the day had not proved an unqualified success.

Beatrice, rather silent and tired and wet, turned in at the vicarage gate beside her cousin. James had left the field before she did; but he was in the Square when the procession reached it, and promptly on her arrival he took charge of her. She was too weary to protest; and, when he took her by the arm and led her indoors, she made no offer at resistance. He closed the front door behind them and, facing her in the dim hall and still holding her arm, he asked:

"Why am I in disgrace?"

She gave a vexed little laugh.

"Don't be silly," she said. "And don't keep me. I am wet through."

"Ah!" he said, and pushed her gently towards the staircase.

Half-way up the stairs she paused and looked back at him.

"I would rather die of pneumonia than wear such boots as Miss Gervais," she said.

She went on up to her room flushed and angry. The remark, she knew, had been ungenerous. She had caught the puzzled questioning in James' eyes, his look of faint surprise at her unexpected outburst, and she felt slightly ashamed. The Gervaises were not well off: James, she knew, respected the patched boots; and possibly he saw nothing unsightly in the

big clumsy feet; it was her own crude remark which would have appealed to him as ugly.

She changed and went downstairs again with the feeling of irritation still uppermost. Mrs. Ashleigh had ordered supper for them; and James, waiting for her to come down before sitting down to it himself, eyed her critically when she made her appearance, his glance travelling, she observed, to her feet.

"Dry shod?" he asked. "Stockings changed?"

"Of course," she answered shortly. "Don't be absurd!"

He laughed, seeming quietly amused at her ill-temper.

"If I didn't know you were not a prude," he said, "I should incline to the belief that you object to my mentioning stockings."

"The child is tired," Mrs. Ashleigh interposed; "don't tease her. She has been on her feet all day. Go along, Beatrice, and make a good meal. You will feel better for it."

"Better tempered, I hope," Beatrice returned, and preceded her cousin to the dining-room.

"You shouldn't," she observed, as she sat down, "comment upon my weak points before other people. It is unkind."

"It would be unkind if it were intentional," he replied. "I may be unobservant, but I fail to recognise the weak points. What are they?"

"That's so like you, James," was all she said in response, as she helped herself from the dish he handed her.

"One should strive to be consistent," he said, "even

when one is merely consistently obtuse. I hope you are awfully hungry—I am. Having my ears boxed whets my appetite.”

Beatrice suddenly laughed. She was not altogether sure that James’ remark was as simple of interpretation as it sounded; but it had the effect at any rate of restoring her spirits. The vexations of the afternoon were trivialities speedily forgotten.

XVIII

ALTHOUGH Charlie had promised to visit his sister at Wedgemere, Beatrice did not believe until his letter arrived fixing a date for the visit that he would come. Their uncle had given both her brothers a general invitation which neither of them had seemed inclined to avail himself of. Teddy had told her frankly not to look to see him at the vicarage; he could not stand parsons; nor had Charlie shown much enthusiasm. She could, he had informed her with brotherly patronage, run up whenever she yearned after him. Now he wrote that he was coming down for a week-end, and threw out tentative suggestions in regard to a room. Mrs. Ashleigh settled that matter by insisting that he should stay at the vicarage.

It was unfortunate that his visit coincided with the visit of a missionary from Papua, who was touring the country for the purpose of raising funds by a series of mission sermons, and who arrived a few days in advance of Charlie. Beatrice entertained uneasy doubts as to her brother's appreciation of the missionary's presence, but she would not write to suggest a postponement for fear it might end in his deciding against coming; she could not risk that disappointment. It was so long since she had seen him; it seemed to her years rather than months. Now that the opportunity offered, she realised that she was hun-

gry for a glimpse of someone belonging to the old life. And Charlie had always been the favourite brother. Teddy was so much older, and of late years he had spent but little time in the home. Although she relied more on her elder brother, and looked to him to secure her future, it was of Charlie she thought oftenest, and whom she longed most earnestly to see. And now Charlie was coming; and not even the ponderous presence of the Reverend Searoyd Pounding, a corpulent egoist with a sonorous voice and a paternal way with comely young women, could damp her eager anticipation in the prospect of seeing him again.

Mr. Pounding evinced no interest in the expected arrival of Mr. Ashleigh's nephew, which he heard freely discussed. The Ashleighs were all unaffectedly glad that Charlie was coming to see his sister; the pleasure they showed in her pleasure touched Beatrice deeply. Had it been a niece instead of a nephew who was expected at the vicarage, Mr. Pounding would have appreciated better the general satisfaction. He liked the gentler sex. Young ladies made usually such sympathetic listeners, and were always enthusiastic over mission labour, and—well, yes, over the labourer too sometimes. Beatrice proved rather disappointing in this respect; she gave him, as far as courtesy allowed, to understand that converting the heathen rather bored her. But his personal anecdotes were amusing; revealing such force of character, so much of courage and endurance, and so great a mastery over uncivilised man and beast, that to listen to them was to be impressed, not with Mr. Pounding's extraordinary bravery, nor with Mr. Pounding's marvellous

powers of control, but with his amazing conceit.

"How splendid it must be to have the power to subdue the king of beasts!" she remarked once on the conclusion of a stirring tale of a thrilling encounter with two lions, from which Mr. Pounding emerged safely with no weapon of defence other than his presence of mind.

"I stood perfectly still and looked at them fixedly," he said. "They dared not approach nearer. Had I moved a muscle, had I fluttered so much as an eyelid, I should have been lost."

"When next I am in London," Beatrice observed, "I shall experiment on the lions in the Zoo. Of course the bars will be between us. Without the bars, I doubt that I should stay to stare a lion out of countenance."

The vicar chuckled, but Mr. Pounding received the speech with perfect gravity.

"I think it not unreasonable to assert," he returned pompously, "that a woman would be at great disadvantage in circumstances similar to those I have just related. Women possess less nerve, and less compelling power; and though ready-witted under ordinary conditions, resource is apt to fail them in instances where great personal courage is the chief essential. I was very relieved that on that occasion I was alone. The presence of another person might have resulted in a very different version of the story."

"I think quite possibly it would have," Beatrice replied; and created a diversion by carrying him off to splice a broken cricket bat for her, which he did in a workmanlike fashion that surprised her.

He also contributed half a crown to the club funds,

to be expended in a match ball; this impulse of generosity being prompted less by his interest in the choir boys than his admiration for the team's secretary. He found Miss Ashleigh a very charming and beautiful girl; and if a little spoilt, in consideration of her beauty, that was almost excusable.

Beatrice drove alone to the station on Saturday to meet her brother. She had been busy with invalid cookery, and was a little late in starting; and though she endeavoured to hurry the fat pony, it was in a sulky mood and obstinately refused to mend its pace. The train was in when she drew up before the station entrance, and the solitary London passenger was standing near the exit, with his suitcase beside him, looking expectantly up the road. When he caught sight of her he flourished his hat, and, the fat pony coming readily to a standstill, he advanced quickly, deposited the suit-case on the floor at Beatrice's feet, and, putting his arm about her, kissed her heartily, to the interested curiosity of a porter and the booking-clerk.

"I made a fairly correct guess that you would meet me," he observed; "likewise that you would be late. I was not brought up in the same nursery with you for nothing."

"Oh, Charlie!" she cried, laughing, and gazing at him with suspiciously bright eyes. "It is good to see you. I didn't realise until I caught sight of you how home-sick I am."

"All right!" he returned, with studied lightness. "Don't cry over me. Let that high stepper of yours go easy, and tell me all about everything. So they're bedding me down at the vicarage? Something like

sleeping in a church, eh? Night and morning prayers, I suppose, and serious conversation?"

"Nothing that will do you any harm," she replied, and added: "They're wonderfully kind, Charlie."

"That's all very well," he returned, manifestly unimpressed. "But they'll be wanting to know my convictions. If they put leading questions to me I'll admit that I'm a Baptist. It's true; I baptize every morning."

"If that's all that is worrying you, you can put it out of your thoughts," she said. "No one will show the faintest interest in your views. You need not, unless you wish, go to church to-morrow—though I should like you to go."

"In order to admire your decorations on the altar," he rejoined, and smiled broadly. "I told you, if you remember, that you were cut out for that sort of thing. Anyway, it agrees with you; you are looking first-rate—even your nose wears a cheerful bloom."

"I'm afraid I scorched that at the kitchen stove this morning," she remarked, tenderly caressing the feature referred to.

"Doesn't our respected uncle keep a cook?" he asked.

"Of course, you old lunatic!"

"Since it is a sign of imbecility to infer that you were cooking from obligation," he retorted, unmoved, "what, I should like to know, were you doing at the kitchen stove?—making toffee?"

"No—making giblet broth for a consumptive boy."

Charlie regarded her critically for a moment with a

hint of hidden things in the look, and concealed a smile with a movement of one hand.

"I can understand the consumption—I am a good trencher man myself," he said. "But what the deuce is giblet?"

"Don't joke, Charlie," she said. "The boy is very ill."

This time he allowed the smile to show as he looked quizzically into her serious eyes.

"So you visit the sick and poor, my fair sister, as well as decorate the altar vases. Have you joined the brass band too?"

"No," she answered, with a laugh. "I'm not tempted that way."

"You are rather nice in your distinctions," he rejoined. "You don't mind cooking, but object to charring. I shall have to report to Teddy that you are sacrificing your sole asset in making giblet broth for the satisfaction of abnormal appetites. Bear in mind, young person, that your face is your fortune."

"How is Teddy?" she asked. "I wish he would come down."

"He probably will if he decides upon taking the step he contemplates. *Nous verrons.*"

"What step is that? He isn't going to be married, surely?"

Charlie patted her shoulder soothingly.

"Keep your hair on, dear girl," he counselled. "Teddy can't support a wife, and he knows it. It's worse than that. He talks of leaving the Service and trying his luck in the Colonies. The complaint he has developed is credulity. He believes it is quite possible,

even easy, to make a fortune without any capital in any country outside these Isles. He proposes digging for the fortune. He would be wiser to stay in England and hoe potatoes."

"Give up the Service!" Beatrice cried, amazed. "What an idea! Didn't you attempt to dissuade him?"

"I told him he was an ass," Charlie admitted. "But when a fellow is positive he is going to dig up a koh-i-noh, he takes a lot of dissuading. He gives as his reason that he wants to make a home for you. It wasn't a bit of use my delicately pointing out that probably while he was busy about it someone else would get in front of him. He says it's up to him to consider you."

"That's dear of him," she replied. "But he mustn't sacrifice his future. I'll write to him. I'm glad you told me. He is a reliable person, isn't he? I don't believe it would enter your thoughts to bother about making a home for me."

"I'd bother right enough," he responded cheerfully; "but ten chances to one when I got the home I should want to ask some other girl to share it. It's no use depending on me. Teddy's your man. He isn't a marrying sort. He has a head too; and, if money is to be made with none to lay out in the making, he is as likely to succeed as anyone. But money appears to me an aggregating commodity, requiring a fairly substantial base of the same material. I may be wrong."

He switched off the conversation from Teddy, and told her items of news about old friends. Once he referred to Wilson. The fellow was always worrying Mrs. Enfield for news of her.

"She wants you to go to them," he finished. "Why don't you, Bee? She needs someone now Ellie has deserted."

Beatrice shook her head, and drew the whip idly across the pony's broad back.

"I can't go yet," she answered at length. "I'd like to; but it would only unsettle me. When I've got used to this life; when I am satisfied to carry on here, then I'll risk returning. I'm afraid to go back so soon."

Charlie did not argue the point. Beatrice had always followed her own lead. He had known her before sacrifice her inclination for motives he neither understood nor sympathised with. For himself, he followed always the path of least resistance.

"Who are the young parishioners?" he asked.

The choir boys were lined up in the road outside the vicarage. They knew that Miss Ashleigh's brother was coming; and they had left the field, where they had their pitch early, for the purpose of viewing the arrival. When the carriage appeared, two of them shouldered their bag and prepared to carry it within. The captain of the team held the gate open. Beatrice leaned over the side of the low carriage to inquire how the match had prospered; and the whole team, staring with unabashed curiosity, drew nearer to observe the newcomer.

"That's my cricket team," she answered, driving through the gate which the captain closed behind her. "They are choir boys—jolly little chaps. I'm secretary to the club. The captain, the one who held the gate, is a delightful boy. I am really fond of him. He's a pickle, though."

"You wouldn't be fond of him if he wasn't," he replied, with conviction. "What's your part in the show? . . . Do you organise meetings and read the minutes?"

Beatrice looked vague; her idea of minutes was connected solely with time; the club was not worked altogether systematically.

"I organise meetings," she said, "and see to it that they pay their subscriptions. Occasionally I fine someone. But, on the whole, they give very little trouble."

"And what part does our reverend cousin take in the club?"

"James? Oh, he only subscribes to it."

"Well, there isn't much excitement about that," he rejoined. "I don't mind subscribing too, if it isn't a ruinous matter. But if anyone had told me nine months ago I should live to see my only sister secretary of a cricket club, parish worker, and proprietress of a soup kitchen, I should have called that man a liar."

XIX

BEATRICE had not prepared her brother for the reception which awaited him; no hint as to the homogeneous gathering collected in the vicarage drawing-room to drink tea in honour of the great missionary escaped her. She alluded remotely to Mr. Pounding's visit, which she referred to as a nuisance.

"He's one of the S.P.G. people," she said. "We get lots of them."

"What do the cryptic letters stand for?" Charlie inquired.

"The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. He is out a lot. And of course there is no need for us to attend the lectures."

"No; I should say distinctly not. If he leaves us alone we shan't quarrel with him. Still, if you had warned me I could have come at a more convenient time."

"I was afraid to risk that," she said, and laughed.

And then Charlie found himself abruptly confronted by a large and representative gathering, as the drawing-room door opened to its widest with disconcerting unexpectedness, and an unknown woman appeared in the aperture and came towards him and kissed him. He was immensely unprepared. He reddened and felt foolish. But no one appeared moved to surprise. The low hum of talk inside the room went on without

pause, broken only by the occasional chink of china, and the intrusive blundering of Hurden as he thrust insistently between the speakers in carrying round tea.

Mrs. Ashleigh politely inquired whether he had had a pleasant journey. She was, she stated with quite obvious sincerity, very pleased to see him. He felt relieved when she turned him over to the vicar, who led him first to the principal guest, and having introduced him to Mr. Pounding, who was not effusive, effected a further introduction to Miss Gervais, and left him with her.

Miss Gervais acknowledged the introduction with qualified pleasure. It interrupted an interesting talk she was enjoying with the great missionary. Next to a corpse there was nothing she loved so well as a missionary; a martyred missionary thrilled her with sublime enthusiasm. She had known one. She had been recalling to Mr. Pounding before Charlie's arrival the horrible details of his massacre in China; and Mr. Pounding had exclaimed in his sonorous voice, with head erect and chest expanded in appreciative pride: "What a glorious distinction! . . . *What* a glorious distinction!" Miss Gervais' dead and tortured acquaintance had won the inestimable privilege of being singled out for the honour of martyrdom in the Church's cause.

Miss Gervais repeated this story to Charlie, dwelling with so morbid a relish on the horrors and indignities which the martyr had suffered, that Charlie felt doubtful of her sanity. The amazed stare with which he received the information of Mr. Pounding's tribute

to, and envy of, the dead man's sufferings, changed to an expression of amusement as his ear caught the sound of Mr. Pounding's complacent voice discoursing amiably on his labours among the heathen, and his glance fell upon the heavy, self-indulgent face above the corpulent figure.

"He looks cut out for a martyr, doesn't he?" he said.

"Yes," Miss Gervais agreed readily. "There is such a grand melancholy in his eyes."

"There's a grand something in them," he rejoined, and laughed. "If you say it's melancholy, I'll accept your word for it. If he enjoys martyrdom, why doesn't he go to Benin? They eat things out there."

Miss Gervais' eyes narrowed as she looked at him in a curiously vindictive way. If he had entertained doubts as to her sanity before, these were finally dispelled: he was not very positive that she was harmless.

"He lectures to-night," she said. "You will hear something about his work at the mission hall."

"Plainly you are not acquainted with my sister," he replied. "She will see to it that I don't attend any lecture but her own. Years of severe discipline have taught me obedience. She is going to take me to church to-morrow, though."

"You will hear Mr. Pounding then," she assured him. "I expect Miss Ashleigh would have preferred you to hear her cousin."

"Why?" he asked, surprised. "Is he something very special in the preaching line?"

"He has improved a great deal lately," Miss Ger-

vais said, and giggled foolishly. "He admires Miss Ashleigh very much."

Charlie scrutinised her with a reflective air.

"So do I," he answered. "I sometimes wish she wasn't my sister. I hope his admiration doesn't affect his appetite. He looks hungry."

His glance travelled in the direction of Mr. Gervais who, standing beside Beatrice with a plate of cake, was pressing this delicacy upon her. Charlie had taken it for granted that the hollow-cheeked ascetic was his cousin. He had rather wondered why he did not come forward and speak to him, but had attributed the lack of cordiality to the ascetic manner; he was therefore considerably taken aback when Miss Gervais, whose swift glance followed his, remarked with frigid emphasis:

"That is my brother."

Not for a moment had Charlie connected Miss Gervais with the church other than as a humble and obscure worker in the parish who was tolerated at the vicarage on account of her usefulness. As the sister of a clergyman, he reflected, with a relentless eye on the holes in the cotton gloves and on the slit in the unbecoming brown veil, she was inconsistent. She might at least mend her clothes.

"I am not going to try to get out of it by saying I meant someone else," he said, looking her steadily in the eyes, with the hint of a smile in his own. "That's a poor way of shuffling out of a mess. I apologise for my *faux pas*. It was unpardonable. All the same, take my advice and feed him up. It isn't healthy to be able to see through a man's head."

Miss Gervais recovered her amiability and started to giggle again.

"You can tell him that to-morrow," she said. "We are coming in to supper after church. I suppose I shall see you then?"

"Oh, you are safe to find me at the supper-table if you happen to miss me elsewhere," he said, and added ambiguously: "You have given me something to look forward to."

Rather late, when the room had thinned considerably, James came in. Charlie, regarding his cousin with a greater attentiveness than he was wont to bestow on his own sex, was forced to acknowledge that so far as externals were concerned James was very passably well favoured. He made the further discovery, when James advanced to speak to him, that he was quite a good fellow. Somehow he had expected, perhaps as a result of Beatrice's statement that James was very near perfection, to find him rather a muff. Mr. Gervais answered more aptly to his mental picture of his cousin than the original. There was so much more of the man than of the priest apparent in James' strong, pleasant face that Charlie found himself liking him instinctively, taking him on trust even before their brief intimate chat cemented this appreciation and fixed it on a firm and enduring basis.

He had meant to chaff Beatrice in regard to James; but, observing James' manner towards her, and her own earnest attention when he spoke, having also in mind the foolish, irrelevant confidence of Miss Gervais, he reconsidered the matter, and decided that it

were wiser to bar James as a topic of conversation when they were alone.

He had ample opportunity for studying his cousin during dinner that evening under cover of Mr. Pounding's talk, which rolled on unceasingly with the resistless inevitableness of an incoming tide. Charlie entertained the suspicion that Mr. Pounding knew they meant to shirk his lecture, and was bent on inflicting as much of it as possible while he held them compulsory listeners at the vicar's hospitable board. It was rather a mean way of securing an audience, he thought.

"What a veritable nest of priests have I dropped into!" he complained to his sister when the others having left for the mission hall, he found himself alone with her. "I don't wonder you are growing serious. It has a sort of damping effect. The big man of the melancholy eye talks like a gramophone—he's about as tactful as a gramophone; whatever's on the record he calls his mind one's safe to get it. Spoilt my dinner with his yarns about the beastly niggers. I can't understand the European craze for blacks."

"He is rather a bore," Beatrice acknowledged.

"And that hungry-looking Jesuit who was here this afternoon—he'd be better for some of your giblet broth, Bee. I tried to buck his sister up to feeding him; but she's only interested in dead missionaries."

"I thought she appeared rather interested in you," Beatrice retorted.

Charlie looked round with a laugh in his eyes.

"I believe she's taken a fancy to me," he said—"old enough to be my aunt too."

"Don't you flatter yourself; it is James who owns her heart."

He lifted his brows.

"So," he murmured, "that's where the shoe pinches! . . . What does he purpose doing with the organ?"

"I doubt whether he realises that he possesses it," she replied.

She was standing near the open window, looking with a faint smile at her brother where he lounged in lazy enjoyment in a low chair with a cushion which she had furnished under his head. She took immense pleasure simply in watching him. It was so good to have him there.

"She is too giddy for James," he said decidedly. "She giggles. And she wouldn't mend his clothes—she doesn't mend her own."

"And how about your clothes?" she inquired derisively.

"Oh! I could get some other girl to do that for me," he returned easily. "James couldn't on account of his cloth. There is some satisfaction in wearing tweed."

Beatrice suddenly laughed.

"You don't appreciate the value of James' cloth," she said. "It carries with it the privilege of commanding service. Even I mend his socks. And I know of one parishioner who makes him braces."

He looked disgusted.

"Well, of course," he said, "I can't compete with that."

It occurred to Charlie, when the party from the mission hall returned, that James, who revealed the

possession of a very excellent baritone and a quite remarkable knowledge of music, was a formidable competitor in most respects. It was not clear to him who proposed music, or if anyone proposed it; possibly it was a nightly custom at the vicarage. James sang to Beatrice's accompaniment; and then Beatrice, as though challenging his serious selection, sang after him a light French love song. Charlie heard James say in response to some low-toned remark of the singer's:

"I like it. It suits you to be gay."

Beatrice made a reply which he did not catch; and in answer to this James rejoined:

"Some people would close every shutter and keep the sunlight out of their lives. But sunlight brightens and purifies and does no harm."

"It fades the carpets, James," observed his mother, who had overheard the last part of his speech and, following an invariable custom with her, interpreted it literally.

Charlie liked the ready laugh with which James received this, and the non-controversial spirit of his acquiescence:

"Occasionally it is necessary to lower the blinds." On the whole, Charlie enjoyed the evening. The thorn in the flesh was Mr. Pounding. Clearly it was Mr. Pounding's duty to talk to the vicar and his hostess; his hostess thought so at least; but Mr. Pounding held other views. He left the nephew to his relations, and monopolised the niece. He was disappointed that she had missed his lecture, the last of the week-day series which he was to deliver. It was, he

informed her, the most interesting of all. He had made it purposely anecdotal and bright and characteristic, because she had said that she found the tales of the natives amusing, and she had shown an interest in their habits and customs. Also he had introduced one or two personal adventures which he would have liked her to hear. He recalled that she had been impressed with certain stories he had told her. Lots of amazing things happened to him. He was not wishful to appear over-confident; but he had been singularly blessed in the matter of miraculous deliverances from situations of grave danger; though for himself he desired nothing better than to die a martyr's death. . . .

No wonder that the congregation as it streamed homeward from the mission hall that night had had nothing but warm words of praise for the beautiful discourse, and had declared it a privilege to sit under such a good man.

XX

WALKING in the garden before breakfast on the following morning, oblivious of the fact that it was the Sabbath, also that he was wandering in grounds that were hallowed so to speak by connection with the church, oblivious indeed of everything for the moment save the inconvenience of the high wind, Charlie, having twice nearly lost his hat, dived within the shelter of the shrubbery in order to escape these manifestations of intolerable high spirits on the part of the elements, and, with his head down after the manner of a bull in the act of charging, muttered:

"Blast the wind!"

"At last," he thought, "I understand why the hat is in disrepute at Oxford."

"Young man," exclaimed a pompous voice in accents of reproof, "you should not permit such licence in your speech."

Lifting his head with a jerk, only in time to avoid butting into the great missionary, Charlie found himself face to face with Mr. Pounding, also taking a stroll before breakfast, bent indeed on the same pursuit as himself.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said. "I had no idea anyone was within hearing."

"Had no human ear caught the profanity of your

remark," Mr. Pounding returned severely, "it would have been within hearing all the same."

Involuntarily Charlie smiled.

"Your estimate of my language is open to question," he said. "The wind being a blast, it is not unsuitable surely to use that term in connection with it? The one suggests the other. To-day, being fairly boisterous, one could not for instance refer to it as a breeze."

"One need not," Mr. Pounding replied sententiously, "refer to it at all."

"There is no need, if it comes to that, to refer to anything," Charlie rejoined. "But that would limit conversation somewhat."

"I do not," Mr. Pounding observed in his best oratorical style, "care to hear the elements thus discussed. They are a dispensation of Providence, and should be accepted in a spirit of submission. All things have their uses."

"I wonder!" Charlie mused, and looked at Mr. Pounding with a speculative eye. Then he switched off the conversation abruptly from that topic and switched it on with equal suddenness to a more congenial theme. "I am looking for my sister," he said. "Have you seen her anywhere about?"

Mr. Pounding had not; he was as a matter of fact looking for her too; therefore he turned and bent his steps in the same direction, and allowed himself to become more urbane.

"It is possible that Miss Ashleigh is out walking," he suggested.

"It is impossible that she is doing anything of the sort," Charlie replied, with conviction, and consulted

his watch. "She is far more likely to be still between the sheets—worm-catching in the dew was never an accomplishment of hers."

Mr. Pounding, who instinctively disliked this young man, found himself wondering how so charming a girl came to possess so objectionable a brother.

"I have since I have been here," he asserted, "invariably found Miss Ashleigh up and abroad at this hour."

And then Charlie became aware of Beatrice skulking behind some rhododendrons, making furtive signs to him behind Mr. Pounding's back.

"I incline to my theory anent the sheets," he said, with unblushing disingenuousness. "I'm going back to the house to make sure. If you meet her, will you tell her, please, that I am waiting for her indoors?"

"What a pity," Beatrice breathed vindictively, when a few seconds later, Charlie having joined her, they made off together in surreptitious haste towards the road, "that the Papua natives were too fastidious to dine off him. They eat each other, he says."

"There is a limit," Charlie plagiarised, "to the endurance of human nature—even of a Papua native's. Mr. Pounding appears to entertain a paternal regard for you."

"I distrust these fatherly old men," Beatrice replied. Charlie smiled broadly.

"He wouldn't enjoy that reflection on his youth," he said.

They walked on quickly, getting by abrupt turns and unsuspected passages into the fields. Beatrice was familiar now with the geography of the neigh-

bourhood; and she avoided the populous haunts, and led her brother to the field-path by intricate and curious ways. When she felt they were sufficiently far from the common route she seated herself on a stile and directed his attention to the landscape, while he leaned against the gate beside her and stared about him with a sort of admiring curiosity that was questioning as well as appreciative. He had dropped into a new world, upon which he looked with the inquiring interest of the receptive mind. It was not just open country he was gazing upon; it was an unfamiliar upland of entirely new thought—a new thought that was strangely compelling and provocative and insistent. He wanted urgently to discuss with her subjects which hitherto they had never touched upon, which they had comfortably ignored with the facile indolence of scepticism; and he was shy now of venturing upon these things. She might misunderstand him, might conceivably deride his earnestness. But his desire to question her upon certain matters overcame his diffidence.

“Since you’ve been here,” he said abruptly, and with a jerkiness of manner that denoted self-consciousness and an increasing difficulty to express himself intelligently—“since you’ve had some opportunity of hearing the other side—of judging, as it were—I want to ask you, have you altered any of your old ideas? . . . We’ve joked about these things, you and I . . . we’ve joked since I came down yesterday; but one gets pulled up occasionally—mentally, I mean. One can’t help wondering.”

He broke off awkwardly, and, flushed and a trifle

shamefaced, evaded her eyes. Beatrice looked at him, faintly perplexed.

"This missionary business," he went on presently—"we laugh at it; but—suppose there is something in it? Suppose they're right, these people, after all? How is one to know?"

She smiled coolly as she sat leaning back against the gate, with her eyes on the drifting clouds which floated lazily in the summer blue. She threw out an expressive hand.

"How can one know?" she asked. "James would tell you, as he has told me, that mission work is simply rebuilding the city which has fallen away. He affirms that every nation has its religion, based more or less on the Christian faith—corruptions of the truth. These mostly include the doctrine of the Trinity—the Incarnation, Sacrifice, and Forgiveness, which are the foundations of the Christian faith. Yet Darwin, a cleverer man than James, asserts that there is no evidence that man was originally endowed with the ennobling belief in the existence of an Omnipotent God; that, on the contrary, there is ample evidence that numerous races have existed, and still exist, who have no idea of one or more Gods, and have no words in their language to express such an idea. . . . How can one know?"

"No."

He seemed to acquiesce; and then, after a further contemplation of the remotely smiling landscape unfolding gradually with the day's advance, becoming more distinctive, more assertive as to colouring, with boundaries sharply defined, and the green of its swelling bosom softening to gold where the early sun ca-

ressed it, he lost something of his freshly acquired assurance, and stared about him perplexedly through a foam of trees to the far-away hills melting into the golden mist of the morning.

"One can't help feeling," he said, "when one looks on all this, that there must be something—Someone. . . . One is forced, as it were, to accept the idea of a Divine Creator. It explains things. I've been thinking a lot about these things lately—I used not to. I'm catching hold of a sort of belief. . . . Are you?"

"No." Her calm, steadfast eyes fastened upon his questioning ones. "I see no greater reason for belief than for unbelief. No one knows. No one can know. I don't see that it matters. 'If we do well here, we'll be well there,' as the old sermon has it."

"But," he persisted, and hesitated . . . "one wants some sort of explanation. . . . The whole thing—life—seems so purposeless else. There's the soul. . . . One wants to know—how things started, and how they are going to end."

"If one demand an explanation of the creation, why not of the Creator?" she asked. "It's so futile. There's no end to it. The finite mind cannot grasp the infinite. I don't want things explained. I am content to say with the poet, 'Behold, I know not anything.'"

"Yes," he rejoined, and leaned with folded arms on the gate, his still perplexed and inquiring eyes wandering speculatively over the landscape. "But that's not enough for me. This matter is beginning to interest me enormously."

"You had better take to week-ending here," she

said, still smiling and faintly ironical. "Uncle Thomas and James will both be ready to give you all the help they can. If they aren't brilliantly clever, they are sincere, and that's better."

"You don't care?" he said, looking at her quietly. She shook her head.

"I don't care," she replied.

He withdrew his gaze then and stared beyond him as before. After all, why should one care? As she said, it wasn't possible for the finite mind to know.

He was still puzzling these matters, still gazing abstractedly into the distance to the neglect of the nearer prospect, when suddenly he was apprised of the approach of someone by the quick movement of his sister as she rose from the stile, and by her spontaneously uttered greeting. He faced about deliberately, and became instantly intensely conscious of, and interested in, the young person who thus disturbed the quiet of their retreat. The girl nodded with curt shyness in response to Beatrice's greeting, and mounted the stile and got over it a little clumsily, and hastened away across the field without looking back.

"By Jove!" Charlie said. "That was a pretty girl."

He started to whistle "There was a miller's daughter" as he leaned again on the gate and looked after the rapidly disappearing figure. There remained in his memory with surprising clearness the quick flash of bright eyes, and the sensuous curve of red pouting lips. She suggested to his mind one of the Greuze heads.

"She doesn't live beside a mill," Beatrice said, "but

on a farm. Aunt Marion speaks of her as a wild girl."

"A wild rose," he corrected. "I am beginning to envy James."

She laughed.

"Rustic beauty loses its appeal when one comes into closer contact. It takes more than a pretty face to compensate for an uncouth mind. I like Jenny. She is rugged, but unmanageable."

"I'd like to try my hand at managing her," Charlie said. "Perhaps James hasn't attempted kindness."

He lifted his head with a jerk, as another figure, emerging unexpectedly, as though it had lain concealed among the growing barley, joined the girl's hurrying form and disappeared beside it into a mist of waving corn.

"The completion of the rustic idyll!" he said in disgusted tones. "That detracts immensely from the poetry. Don't you think it is time we were cutting back to breakfast?"

"Ridiculous boy!" she smiled, and slipped a hand within his arm as she turned and walked back with him along the path between the barley.

That was Charlie's way—one moment profoundly serious, with a sense of grave responsibility and the necessity for big decisions, and the next carelessly shifting the responsibility, satisfied with the hour and the pleasures that it brought.

XXI

CHARLIE'S visit to Wedgemere was productive of results which he had not foreseen when one day he had carelessly decided to go and see his sister. His aunt and cousin had made him simply welcome; his uncle had given him to realise that he ought to have come sooner, and had wrung a promise from him to come again at no great distance of time. He had, and was surprised to feel it, a strange sense of kinship and sympathy with these relations of his. They inspired liking in him and trust. He was glad that he had made the journey. And yet he was not tempted to prolong his visit, although nothing claimed him but an engagement with Mrs. Enfield at her country house. He was going from Wedgemere into Berkshire. Ellie was to be there—and her husband. And possibly Teddy would spend a few days. Mrs. Enfield had wished Charlie to bring Beatrice back with him; but Beatrice was, as she expressed it, scared to go. She was not yet sufficiently settled in the new life to risk a return to the old—a return which could not be enduring, and which might stir up within her a new restlessness, a greater discontent.

"You can't understand," she told him, "because you're a man. Life is made easy for you. You can map out your own future."

"You used to stand up to me in the old days in

defence of the equality of the sexes," he reminded her, smiling. "You knocked me about, if you remember. But you haven't proved your case."

"The equality of sex—yes," she admitted thoughtfully—"but not the equality of chance. Life is made easy for you. We've got to wrest everything we get by sheer force of will and brain and energy. They don't always go together, these qualities. And it's a hard fight, an unequal fight, at the best, this fight against the accepted order of things—against prejudice and envy and the assured competition of those long established in the field. Men don't take kindly to change, and the competition of women means change—a big, an ever-menacing change. You've got to face it—got to accept it some time. It is one of the inevitabilities of the future—nature's abundant insistence upon the futility of waste. I had my chance, and I didn't take it. I didn't prove my case. Stronger women than I have proved it—are proving it. They will win in the end. I'm a failure. I admit it. As a result, I am living dependent on the kindness of others. Write me down an individual failure, Charlie, but don't write failure against the sex. That isn't fair— isn't playing the game. It's like stabbing in the back when you have your adversary at a disadvantage but not beaten. It's mean . . ."

So Charlie went into Berkshire without his sister, and explained her refusal to accompany him as a hair-shirt argument against having a good time.

"She is in the most select company," he said. "I left her to the improving society of the Bishop of Rumbifoo."

"Who is he?" Mrs. Enfield asked vaguely.

Charlie smiled.

"Oh, just a missionary man without a sense of humour. Bee is developing on those lines herself; she's a different girl altogether. To use a flowery metaphor, she is rather like a rose bush run to seed."

Mrs. Enfield looked genuinely alarmed.

"You don't mean—do you?—that she is growing fat?"

He laughed outright at that.

"No—hipped was what I intended to convey. . . . She does parish work, and darns James' socks."

"The curate-cousin's?" Mrs. Enfield was horrified. "She might have worn a coronet," she said tragically. "She can still have Ernest Wilson—he's moonstruck for her. I will never forgive you if you let her throw herself away on a miserable curate."

"I can't help it," Charlie expostulated. "She seems to like that sort of thing. And—hang it all!—James is quite a good sort."

Teddy, to whom Mrs. Enfield unburdened herself later, was so annoyed that, to his brother's amazement, he came to his room and questioned him on the subject. It had seemed more of a joke than anything else to Charlie; he had never seriously considered James as a possible brother-in-law.

"I would have let her marry Hurst rather than that should happen," Teddy said.

"Do you mean," Charlie asked, showing his astonishment, "that she was really gone on that fellow? He hung round a lot at one time; but I thought he was only one of her boys."

"She liked him," Teddy asserted.

A queer glint shone in the blue eyes which Charlie fixed on his brother's face, a puzzled, inquiring, slightly hostile glint. He began to see light—to understand better why Beatrice preferred the quiet of the country, why she seemed to have lost the bright keenness, the hope and the spring of youth.

"How came she to let you influence her in such a matter?" he asked.

"I told her—something about him. . . . You've heard it, though it isn't generally known."

"And—why—the devil—did—you—do it?" demanded Charlie, with emphatic slowness.

Edward Ashleigh changed colour, but he managed to keep his temper.

"Would you wish Beatrice to marry Hurst?" he asked coldly.

"No," Charlie rapped out shortly. "I'd rather she married James Ashleigh. I'm only afraid now she won't."

And for several seconds after he was alone he paced the floor of his bedroom and let off profanities at a rate that would have fairly pulverised Mr. Pounding, and compared with which the blasting of the elements was mere poetic fancy. That Bee, smart, bright, jolly Bee, should hit up against a blank wall like this and hurt herself—badly! . . . And for a man like that—self-contained, *farouche*—handsome of body and face, and possessed of an ugly mind. It was unthinkable. . . . And yet, after all, what did he know about the man's mind? He knew of one ugly incident in his life—only one; some men have many such

scores against them. It might be that that ugly incident was an inconsistency, a septic sore disfiguring otherwise healthy flesh—it might have little or nothing to do with his mind . . . his mind might conceivably be set against that sort of thing, might recoil from it, as a healthy person recoils instinctively from the sight of a festering wound. To damn the man on account of one slip was unjust; like—and he came to a standstill, smiling at the thought which came to him—damning a sex on account of a case of individual failure. It was unreasonable and therefore ridiculous.

“She won’t marry a curate,” he said; and undressed and got into bed, dismissing the thoughts which like unsightly clouds had trailed for a space across the smiling blue.

Charlie slept soundly and dreamed of a wild-rose face among the barley. And in Devonshire a girl lay, wide-eyed and wakeful, thinking—thinking always, not of Charlie, but of a dark, strong face with discontented eyes; of a little boat gliding over the moonlit water; and of the sweep of the tide among the reeds. A waking dream more disturbing than the dream of Charlie’s sleeping moments—a dream which did not fade with the coming of the new day.

XXII

THE summer waned, and with the finish of August the first of Beatrice's "special cases" was wiped off the list. Towards the end of the month Mrs. Rogers died. She had been dying for so long—had been "given up," and rallied, and been "given up" again, until Beatrice had come to believe that death in its reluctance to separate the old couple was holding back until it could claim them both. And then unexpectedly one day James came home with the news that she was gone.

James appeared upset. He had been fond of the old couple, and his sorrow was for the husband who was left alone and inconsolable. He made no appeal to Beatrice, but she knew instinctively what he wished her to do and did not like to propose. This was the difficult part of the task which she had undertaken—the continuing sadness for which James had prepared her at the beginning—this helpful ministry to a stricken heart that knew no ties, had no friends other than the unequal friendship of the vicarage.

"Do you think it would add to his distress if I went so soon to see him?" she asked.

He looked at her with quick appreciation.

"I hoped you would suggest going," he said. "You are sure you don't mind?"

She smiled faintly, without answering.

"It would cheer him considerably," he said. "Poor old chap! I left him sitting there before the empty grate—just feeling and grieving."

Beatrice turned away abruptly, and went upstairs to fetch her hat. "Sitting before the empty grate—just feeling and grieving." Feeling and grieving . . . the tragedy of hopeless sorrow was depicted in the words.

In the mellow warmth of the twilight Beatrice set out across the fields on her vague errand of comfort. It was difficult to realise that the old sufferer was gone. She had been with her on the previous afternoon, and had left her bright and smiling, looking forward with pleasurable anticipation to the shortening of the days and the cosy comfort of the firelight behind drawn blinds. The winter, when the wind rioted without and all was bright and warm within, in pleasing contrast to the swish of rain against the glass and the rattle of the wind outside the door, had been the best time of the year to this woman whose world lay centred in one tiny room. And the evenings would draw in and the long, savage winter nights come and find her gone, and only the old man there—sitting before the grate, feeling and grieving.

Outside the cottage door Beatrice encountered Mrs. Morey. Mrs. Morey had been in and out all day, she stated, and was 'most wore off her legs. She wore the air of importance inseparable from these occasions; but behind the importance was apparent a sense of injury; plainly some grievance overshadowed her usual complacent competence and general helpfulness.

"'Er ought to a died this mornin'," she complained.

"I've been in an' out all day expecting the end; and 'er was that obstroperous like—seemed as if 'er wouldn't die. 'Er was all but gone before breakfast. Seein' 'twas the end like, I sent for the undertaker, an' 'e come about eight; an' 'er wasn't gone then. 'E measured 'er though. 'Twasn't worth his while comin' up again, an' 'er all but gone. 'Er 'ad to be got into the shell pretty quick after 'er was dead, you see. The coffin come up just 'alf an hour after 'er went; an' 'er was put in an' screwed down and all comfortable within the hour. So us didn' dally over our part. 'Twas 'er what kept things about. The ol' man seems to 'ave gone daft like. He sets before the hearth an' cries like a cheeld, an' don't notice nothing."

"It seems hard," Beatrice said, "that after all those years together they couldn't have gone together. He wished it."

"I don't see no sense in that," Mrs. Morey argued. "Us don't all come into the world together, us can't expect to go out together. 'E's got to bear the partin' same's other folks."

Beatrice left her at the gate, and pushed open the door of the cottage without knocking, without thinking of knocking; the picture of the old man sitting before the empty grate, daft-like and crying childishly, was so vividly before her that to have knocked, to have behaved in any conventional way, would have seemed to show a want of understanding. She therefore pushed the door softly, and entered softly, and stood for a moment startled by the dimness of the twilit interior, by the stillness. Instinctively she recalled another day drawing to its close, another room, hand-

somer and dimly lit by a shaded lamp, but similar to this room in its deadly stillness, in its air of silence and unoccupation. And yet that room had not been unoccupied; nor was this; the living and the dead were both here.

The sight of the coffin on its trestles—a lengthened shadow in the shadowy room—covered with a few white flowers, shocked her. She recovered from that; and her compassionate gaze shifted abruptly and found the old man, a shrunken figure, with dropped head between the hunched shoulders, and aimless hands resting open upon his knees. She went to him quickly, and put her arms about him, and drew the poor quivering face to her shoulder and let him weep there against her neck.

“Poor dear!” she said. “Poor dear! . . . Just cry your heart out as you want to. I know. . . . Oh! I know how you feel.”

He only vaguely apprehended what she said. Misery had deadened his understanding, and had decreased in a curiously unconscious way the distances which separated them. Sorrow and feeling are primitive emotions. He was sensible only of his grief; of the comfort, the protective compassion of her encircling arms; of the human quality of this tender sympathy which, dropping all barriers, reached out to him in his sorrow with warm womanly kindness that bore no semblance to the formless shadow of sympathy contained in empty phrases, but stood for what it was, the generous impulse of a loving nature. And so he let his weary old head rest where she had placed it,

and wept his heart out for its easement as she had bade him do.

"Seems a'most as if I couldn't bear it," he whimpered presently. "Never once in all these years 'ave 'er left me for a night. I've asked the Lord time an' again to take me too; but I ban't wanted, seems so."

And then, after an interval:

"I buried 'er foot along with 'er. I digged en up out o' the garden an' put en in the coffin; so when the last trump calls 'er'll be ready and complete."

After a while Beatrice asked him if he had eaten recently; and when he replied dully that he couldn't swallow aught, she suggested a cup of tea. He thought he might take a dish o' tay; and looked with wistful uncertainty towards the oil stove on which he cooked the frugal meals when the fire was not in use.

"You leave it to me," she said. "I'll make it for you."

But she had to call upon him after all, being ignorant as to the working of an oil stove. Between them the water was boiled and the tea made; and Beatrice cut bread and butter into thin slices, and cut the slices into fingers, and smilingly tempted him to eat. He appeared better for the simple meal, light though it had been; he cried less, and talked to her reminiscently about his old woman. She was always his old woman from the day when he had married her, a slip of a girl in her teens.

Beatrice stayed with him until the light failed altogether, and the lamp had to be lighted and, rescuing the room from its obscurity, brought the coffin into prominence and the empty bed on which the sick

woman had lain so long. It was like being in a room with ghosts. The old man looked about him uneasily when she rose to go, and shivered; and she saw the tears well to the red rims once more.

"I wish 'e'd a sent it," he muttered. "I didn' seem to mind afore; but I wish now 'e'd a sent it."

"Sent what?" Beatrice asked, confronting him with her hand on the latch of the door.

"The spirit to comfort me," he answered. "Mr. Gervais 'e said something when 'e was leavin' 'bout the spirit being sent to comfort me; an' I been looking for that blessed liquor ever since. But I expect 'e's forgot."

"You shall have it," Beatrice said, and wondered what Mr. Gervais would think of this interpretation of his words of spiritual comfort. "I pass the shop. You shall have it within half an hour."

And as she went out and faced the summer dusk a smile shone in her eyes behind their sadness at the thought of the comfortable oblivion which her more material spirit would shortly bring.

When she reached the vicarage supper was in progress; but no one commented on her lateness; nor did they put any questions to her. They were all curiously reticent in regard to this death, behaving almost as if it concerned them in an intimate and personal manner. This living in other people's sorrows was a further fresh experience for her.

Later she encountered her cousin in the hall just going out. He paused in the act of reaching for his hat to speak to her.

"I can't try over that song to-night," he said.

"No," she replied. And added, "You are going out?"

He stood for a moment with his hat in his hand; then he opened the door while he answered:

"Yes; I am going to the old man."

"To sit with him?" She looked surprised.

"I can't let him watch through the night alone," he said. "I've got that picture of him in my brain . . . sitting before the hearth."

She followed him to the door and stood on the step and looked after him as he ran down the short path to the gate.

"Good-night, Jim," she called into the darkness.

She wondered when his cheery response came back to her listening ears what James would make of the particular brand of spirit she had sent to comfort the old man's stricken soul.

XXIII

WITH the waning of summer Beatrice's cricket team became more and more indifferent in respect to the payment of weekly subscriptions, and developed a sudden and overwhelming enthusiasm for football. Beatrice was elected secretary for the newly formed football club. James had given the goal posts, but the funds had yet to be raised. Since the choir was voluntary, the raising of funds presented no serious difficulty; it was only a matter of an organised demand, and the payment of the weekly subscription which amounted to a halfpenny each member.

With the presentation of the goal posts the weekly subscriptions started to come in again with pleasing regularity. David Hopkins had been unanimously elected captain of the football as well as of the cricket team, this by virtue of his position as senior chorister, and in tacit recognition of Miss Ashleigh's liking for him. The boys recognised that Dave was the favourite, and oddly they did not appear to resent this. David had won his way to Beatrice's heart when, as a voice under her window, she had heard him singing on the night of her arrival in Wedgemere. But her liking did not blind her to his faults. She was rather more critical of his behaviour than of that of the rest; and he was a very human boy.

James on one occasion was privileged to be an un-

suspected witness of the chastisement of David at the secretary's hands. The little scene, revealing her in an altogether new aspect, an inflexible, severe, entirely just aspect, impressed him curiously, and so startled him that, although aware that he was eavesdropping, he could not for the life of him make his presence known.

He had blundered upon the scene inadvertently, and discovered her in the lobby where the boys kept their cricket and football gear. She stood near the outer door with her back to the passage along which James had come; and the boy faced her, nervous and sheepish, with his head down, the colour coming and going in his cheeks. James stood still, surprised. They neither of them saw him, and he paused for a space in the dimness of the passage, feeling trouble in the air and curious as to the cause.

David had been detected outside the gate smoking; and Beatrice, who discouraged these habits in her team, was demanding the cigarette which at the moment was burning a hole in his trouser pocket, whither he had thrust it at sight of her with disingenuous intent to deceive. Rather to James' surprise, the boy after a certain hesitation reluctantly drew forth the discoloured end of cigarette and held it out on his open palm. With an exclamation of disgust Beatrice threw it among some evergreens bordering the path.

"You promised me you wouldn't smoke," she said severely. "Why did you promise that if you didn't intend to keep your word?"

"I did mean to give it up," he said; "but it isn't

easy when once you've drawn it into your lungs like what I 'ave."

"Don't talk to me like that," she said. "Does your father know you smoke?"

"No. 'E'd give me a lacing if 'e did."

"Then the next time I catch you at it, I will let him know."

"You won't catch me no more," he assured her, with the conviction of one resolved upon added caution in future. "Somebody give me the fag. I only 'ad three whiffs at it."

"What did I promise you," she asked, "if I caught you smoking?"

He retreated a step or two, and put up a defensive hand.

"I don't break my promises, David. Come here."

For a moment he hesitated. He was looking frightened. Also he looked, the watcher observed, furtively towards the gate. It was a toss up whether he did not make a bolt for it. Beatrice's discipline, however, was greater than her cousin suspected.

"You won't mark my face?" he said anxiously.

"I shall endeavour to," returned the inflexible voice, which James scarcely recognised with its note of insistent displeasure.

"They'll want to know at 'ome what done it," he said.

"Then I hope you will tell them the truth."

There was something so relentless in the voice, something so expectant in the waiting pause, that James found himself holding his breath in the dimness, almost as though his own ears burned in ex-

pectation of being boxed. It hardly surprised him to see the boy suddenly step forward, head erect, and fixed as though glued to his shoulders, his arms hanging straight at his sides. It did not surprise him because he felt that in the same circumstances he should act exactly as the boy was acting; evasion was out of the question; but it did surprise him that Beatrice should strike the proffered cheek, and strike it fairly hard. Had such a cheek been presented to him for punishment he could not have raised his hand. James winced as the boy winced, his face even flushed in sympathy with the childish face, which, white before, turned crimson under the indignity and the smart of the blow.

The boy swung round on his heel without a word and marched off; and James, with detection imminent, stood hesitating and uncertain, waiting for Beatrice to turn and discover his presence. Before, however, she had time to turn, David Hopkins was back again confronting her, with blue embarrassed eyes lifted to her astonished gaze.

"I'm sorry I done it," he said in a strangled voice, and jerked out the further confession which it scarcely surprised her to hear. "I done it last Saturday too when you smelt me and I said I'd been sittin' next a chap what smoked."

Instantly upon uttering this confession he prepared for flight; but Beatrice was too quick for him. She caught his arm and detained him forcibly. James felt almost as uncomfortable as the boy; he feared, as David feared, that she meant to chastise him further; and he felt somehow that it wasn't playing the game.

"You didn't ought to hit me for that," the boy expostulated, with a wary eye on her hand.

Her response to this was to seize him by the shoulders and draw him to her and kiss him; and James, becoming tardily aware that he had no right whatever to be observing these things, quietly withdrew and retired to the dining-room and waited for her there.

A few minutes later she entered to discover him standing upon the hearthrug doing nothing. His air of leisurable inactivity surprised her; he looked as though he might have stood there doing nothing for hours instead of rather under five minutes. He looked up at her entrance with an inquiring smile.

"Disengaged at last?" he said.

"Yes," she answered. She advanced to the window and threw it open. "I have been pouring the vials of my wrath on the head of David Hopkins."

"You brought the weight of your hand on his head, I know," he said.

She swung round and looked at him with astonished eyes. Then she laughed.

"James—you sinner!—you have been watching me."

"Do you think that I deserve to have my ears boxed too?" he asked.

"I do. It was inexcusable."

"The temptation was great," he pleaded. "Do you usually mix your bitter with sweet?—like a Gregory powder followed by jam."

Beatrice laughed again.

"I hit him so hard," she said; "and he really took it awfully well."

"It wouldn't surprise me," James continued, "to hear that you had followed up the jam with cake."

"I did," she assented, looking amused. "He liked the cake best."

"That's the irony of things," he responded. "When we can have jam we don't appreciate it; when we can appreciate it we are not allowed it. I think it shows well for your authority when a boy of twelve walks up to receive a box on the ears like that. After all, he needn't have taken the punishment."

"Perhaps not," she allowed. "He needn't either have confessed to telling me a lie. How about their sense of honour now, James?"

"Haven't you perhaps instilled that into them?" he said. "You've done wonders with your boys, Bee—with that particular boy, at least. You have taught him to be fond of you. That's half the battle. How are the funds looking up?"

"They are looking down at present," she answered, feeling oddly disconcerted at this unexpected familiarity with her name; he had never addressed her in that way before. "The football cost seven and six, and now they want a match ball. When that is bought we are faced with a deficit. I think I can persuade the Lawrences to give the ball."

"So you aren't tired of your team yet?"

"No. It isn't all unalloyed joy though. They broke my bicycle pump yesterday in blowing up the football, and appeared quite aggrieved that I should consider it their fault rather than the pump's. Everything I possess seems to belong to them by right of

partnership. I am grateful that they don't ask me to blow up the ball for them—they expect me to keep the cricket bag in good repair. But they trust me implicitly with the funds."

James laughed.

"You are very tolerant where boys are concerned," he said. "That comes of having brothers, I suppose; you understand them. It isn't only boys you understand," he added, and scrutinised her reflectively. "I wonder where you get your wide sympathy? Do you realise what a place you have made for yourself here? . . . how greatly you would be missed if you went away?"

"Just temporary missing," she said, and sat down at the table and played with the fringe of the cloth. "I haven't made myself essential to anyone."

"Are you sure of that?" he asked. "I know someone who could contradict that—someone to whom life would appear fairly blank without your bright, inspiring presence. You have made yourself more necessary than you think."

She glanced up at him with a quick smile.

"You mean the old man," she said, and shook her head. "You're wrong. He'd miss me, of course; but you come first there. You come first always—except in the case of my tiny namesake. The baby is more mine than yours. I'm not really jealous, James; but I think that's why I love the baby best. . . . I'm first there. With all the others it's you."

James laughed pleasantly, without a trace of conceit. His popularity was won, not sought after; and

it pleased without inflating him. But she was wrong in her surmise. When he had spoken of her indispensability to the happiness of another, old Rogers had not been in his thoughts.

XXIV

AUTUMN passed and was succeeded by a particularly bitter winter. Frost set in early. Snow lay on the ground in December, and the winds were very keen. Much distress prevailed in Wedgemere; and as a consequence the calls upon the vicarage were numerous. The vicar was possessed of private means, and the tastes of his family being simple, much was given away in charity—given ungrudgingly, and without expectation of, or desire for, thanks.

To Beatrice a hard winter had meant in the past winter sports, big fires and social gatherings, and general gaiety. She had not realised the suffering which bitter weather brings to those who have no means of fighting it. To learn that people sewed brown paper between their thin blankets for the sake of the added warmth was a painful revelation to her. She had not known before that cold can hurt; that poverty hurts; that it is not merely a vaguely interesting condition* which has no actual existence, or, if it exists, is comfortably taken in hand by the State. It pained her too to observe, despite her relations' unquestionable generosity, the distinction made between those who belonged to the church and those who were without the pale. It seemed to Beatrice that this urgent, insistent cry for help was so human that it was entitled to a prompt human response; also it seemed to

her unnecessary that these applicants for assistance should be obliged to lay bare their intimate private concerns before getting the help they required. They were poor and in straits; surely it was only right that those more fortunate should give—that the giving should not be done after the manner of a favour? But the church demanded not only the proof of need but of worthiness. Small wonder that so many hypocrites stand open-handed before the poor box.

There was a pleasanter side to the winter—a side which was equally amazing, and quite as novel to Beatrice—the local effort to provide social entertainment. There was a concert of doubtful quality given by the Y. M. C. A., and a *conversazione* organised by the Girls' Friendly. Mrs. Ashleigh was patroness of both entertainments; and Beatrice, curious, interested, occasionally bored, accompanied her aunt and sat on the platform with the elect and watched the general enjoyment. *Conversazione* was a euphony for dancing and games.

At the Y. M. C. A. concert she took part. She sang, and played James' accompaniments when he sang—an act which led to much whispering and nudging and the interchange of significant glances. The parish was of one mind that Mr. Ashleigh would marry his cousin.

Later there were parties for the Bible classes and the Church Lads' Brigade; and Mrs. Ashleigh entertained all the Sunday-school teachers, the choir, and other parish helpers to supper.

Lastly, and most important in Beatrice's opinion, was a New Year Eve dance which the Lawrences

were giving. They had guests staying in the house for the Christmas week, and on the day of the dance an unexpected cousin arrived without invitation, and was welcomed as an extra man.

The New Year Eve dance proved a source of vexation between Beatrice and her relations. They were all opposed to her going; she felt that instinctively, though neither her uncle nor her aunt offered any verbal remonstrance. Their silence, the way in which they ignored the subject, was eloquent in itself. Had they asked her categorically to decline the Lawrences' invitation she would have felt constrained to accede to their wish, but to renounce pleasure on unspoken condemnation alone made no sort of appeal to her. James' attitude was particularly annoying. He appeared in a lofty, injured way to regard her acceptance as a breach of faith with himself. Only a few days before the arrival of the invitation he had been talking to her with eager enthusiasm of the New Year Eve service to be held in the church, a midnight festival which he and the organist were labouring untiringly to make a choral success. James was very anxious that Beatrice should attend the service. He discussed the musical part with her and invited suggestions.

"You will enjoy the singing," he had said, taking her attendance for granted.

"Why hold a midnight service on New Year Eve?" she had asked. "I thought only Papists did that. What is it for?"

He had looked at her in surprise, and answered in his quiet way:

"To begin the New Year righteously; to pray for

help to continue through it worthily; to ask forgiveness for the sins committed during the year that is past."

"It doesn't sound very cheery," she had responded, and had laughed when she caught his earnest, puzzled look.

And now she had decided in preference of the dance; and James was feeling both displeased and hurt. He was more distressed than the matter would seem to warrant; though oddly he had not once sought to dissuade her during the only time when opposition would have been effective: he had let the days slip by without speaking, until it was New Year Eve and the time for speaking was past.

That night to which he had looked forward so pleasantly found him disquieted and disproportionately grieved. Twice while Beatrice was upstairs dressing for the dance he wandered into the hall with some idea of evading her, of getting away before she came down, gay, indifferent, provocative, dressed in unfamiliar clothes that would emphasise the difference between his life and hers; and each time he returned to the drawing-room to await her appearance. He paced the carpet while he waited with quick, impatient strides. Mrs. Ashleigh, sitting crocheting a child's garment, laid down her work and gave her attention to James.

"What makes you so unsettled?" she asked. "Are you vexed that Beatrice should go to this party to-night?"

He paused in his uneasy pacing of the carpet and forced himself to a quieter mood.

"Yes," he replied concisely.

Mrs. Ashleigh's lips closed in a hard, decisive manner peculiar to them when she was displeased. She took up her work again and deliberately counted stitches.

"You and your father are very foolish where Beatrice is concerned," she observed presently. "You are both over-anxious to please her in every way. Her own good sense should tell her that while she lives in a clergyman's household she should conform with the ways of the house. If she hasn't the sense to see that for herself your father should point it out to her."

"I had hoped she would attend the service to-night," he said, instinctively defending her, even while holding her blameworthy. "But it is natural she should be fond of parties. She is accustomed to that sort of thing."

"She is naturally frivolous," Mrs. Ashleigh returned. "I think you should direct her thoughts to more serious things."

And then Beatrice came downstairs. James heard her cross the hall. He went to the door and threw it open, and stood on the threshold watching her with amazed eyes alight with admiration, his quickened pulses beating with feverish insistence. The sight of her loveliness dazzled him. He had never before realised the effect of full dress on a woman—a woman young and beautiful as Beatrice was. Her dress was unrelieved white; and the full white throat and rounded arms were but a warmer tint of the prevailing colour. In the gaslight the gold of her hair glinted like sunlight on water.

James' gaze fastened on the radiant figure, and his face grew more serious while he looked. There was an expression in his eyes that was something more than mere admiration, an expression that was entirely human and as old as life itself.

Beatrice had paused outside the study door to speak to the vicar, who, coming forward, complimented her appearance. James caught the soft, gay laugh with which she received his words of approval, and then her voice growing suddenly grave, she asked:

"Do you think I am doing wrong in going to the dance to-night?"

"No play is harmful when the heart is pure," the vicar replied, without a trace of rebuke in his tones. "If I asked you to come instead to the service, I believe you would come."

"Yes," she answered earnestly; "I would do that."

"That is just why I have not asked you," he returned. "When you go to God's House it must be from a higher motive than the wish to please. Wherever you are, I have no fear that you will begin the New Year unworthily. I like to see you happy."

She kissed him, and he went back into the study and closed the door behind him. He had seen his son waiting in the hall; and the expression on James' face troubled him.

Beatrice saw James too when she turned round; she had not known before that he was there; and she put her hand through his arm and drew him back into the room.

"Watching me again, James!" she admonished him. "I shall really be obliged to keep an eye upon you."

Releasing his arm, she advanced to where her aunt sat, plying her needles inflexibly and with lowered gaze; she stood before her, deprecating and nervously smiling, an appealing rather than a confident figure. As before when she had gained her point against their unspoken disapproval she felt no sort of satisfaction in her success.

"Are you displeased with me too?" she asked.

Mrs. Ashleigh lifted reluctant eyes and, having lifted them, forgot her annoyance in admiration of the girl's loveliness before her. She, like her son, had not been prepared for anything quite so dazzling. The girl's amazing beauty moved her, though differently, almost as powerfully as it moved James.

"Beatrice, how nice you look!" she exclaimed.

"It's a last year's gown," Beatrice said doubtfully.

"You will be the best-dressed girl in the room," Mrs. Ashleigh asserted, with a certain pride in her voice. "I wish it had been some other night, so that James could have accompanied you."

James, silent and observant in the background, was wishing that also. Somehow the midnight service had lost much of its interest for him. He would not allow it, even to himself, but the absence of his cousin detracted immensely from his anticipatory pleasure. He had believed that his untiring zeal in working for this service had been actuated by the loftiest motives in the service of Christ and the Church; and now the stark fact was thrust upon his unwilling intelligence—whether he admitted it or not was immaterial—that this unflagging energy, this earnest enthusiasm, had been animated largely with a desire to capture the in-

terest and appreciation of this girl in whom for him the pleasure and the goodness of life were centred. With her absence from the festival, the beauty, the inner meaning of it all, was lost. It was not the right way to look at things. James realised that, realised it so certainly that his conscience lashed him to an agony of remorse. He loved his cousin; he knew it, had known it for some time. The thing which troubled him was not his loving her, but the fear that he loved her unworthily. In allowing his carnal thoughts of her to come between him and his duty to and love of God, he recognised that he was dragging love from the height at which it should stand, and deliberately lowering it to the human level of physical attraction. James was experiencing passionate love for the first time; he wanted to keep the love and eliminate the element of passion; he might as reasonably have demanded a fire without heat.

James saw his cousin out to the waiting cab and put her into it. He was so silent, his face and manner were so moody as he held the cab door open and shut it upon her, that before pulling up the window Beatrice leaned out and addressed him.

"Why are you so angry with me?" she said.

"I don't know," he answered truthfully. "I don't think I am."

"Yes," she insisted; "you are. You are doing your utmost to spoil my evening."

"I don't wish to," he said. "I am a little disappointed. That's it, I suppose."

He stood back and spoke to the driver. Beatrice pulled up the window with a jerk. She felt unac-

countably vexed because he had not expressed the hope that she would enjoy the dance. And James, returning to the house, and shutting the outer door against the rush of cold air, felt vexed with himself in an equal degree for this very omission, which he could not, however, have uttered truthfully. He also felt immensely displeased with Beatrice.

XXV

DURING the short, cold drive to the Lawrences' house, Beatrice, as a result possibly of the chilled, fusty atmosphere of the closed cab, as much as the chill of James' manner, felt neither elation at the prospect of the party nor that quiet confidence in herself and in her world which had made similar entertainments in the past an assured success. Much of the pleasure of the evening was lost beforehand.

She arrived at the house dispirited and cold, so little attuned to gaiety that as she mounted the steps it crossed her mind to wonder whether, after all, she would not have been as profitably occupied in attending the service. The thought brought a smile to her lips. It occurred to her as significant of the changes in herself that such a speculation should have presented itself.

When she came downstairs, having taken off her wraps, she found Enid Lawrence waiting at the foot of the stairs. She stood with one hand on the newel, talking with a man who had his back to the staircase, her face upraised and more earnest in its expression than usual; and, as Beatrice descended, she became aware that the eyes in the upturned face were observing her with open curiosity, while their owner murmured in a quick aside:

"She is coming down now."

At this intelligence her companion's figure straightened itself, but he did not look round until Beatrice reached the level of the hall and paused on the lowest stair to return Enid's greeting. Then he faced her fully. Beatrice, meeting his gaze, prepared in a sense, for she had known from the moment her glance fell upon the straight, soldierly back who it was waiting in the hall below, felt herself none the less colouring warmly before the searching scrutiny of the sombre eyes. Never in her most extravagant moments had she pictured meeting him quite like this. She had believed she would meet him again, some time, possibly in London, possibly also without preparation; but she had not thought of him in Devonshire. Enid had not mentioned his name to her; there had been nothing to connect him with Wedgemere—not even the belief that he might come and seek her out.

"My cousin tells me you are old friends," Enid said.

And Beatrice felt instinctively from the speaker's manner, from the very fact of her being there at the foot of the stairs with him waiting for her to descend, that the confidence had been more complete than was conveyed in that bare claim to friendship. She gave him her hand, oddly disconcerted and ill at ease.

"It seems a long time since we met," she said, an uncertain smile hovering about her lips. "I had no idea . . ." She broke off and glanced at Enid. "One is always tumbling against surprises."

"Teddy told me you were here," he said. "I came down this afternoon."

Enid laughed.

"He wasn't included in the invitations," she explained. "We never thought of him." She gave a nod towards a door on the other side of the hall, good-naturedly desirous of assisting her cousin over the difficulties of the encounter. "Why not go into the study and have a chat? You can join the dancing when the music begins."

She turned away, leaving them alone together. Hurst looked towards the door of the study and then back at his silent companion, and his eyes, in eloquent contradiction of his impassive face and somewhat abrupt manner, fastened upon hers with a strong appeal in their steady gaze.

"What do you say?" he asked. . . . "Shall we take advantage of that suggestion?"

"I—if you wish," she answered, and found her limbs moving mechanically in the direction indicated.

"You must allow a little for my surprise," she said, as she entered the room and watched him close the door after him before turning and facing her. "I did not expect to see you here. I had no idea you were related to the Lawrences."

"It's very remote," he said, seizing on any small commonplace to bridge the awkwardness of these first few minutes. "I'm not a cousin really, but a connection of Mrs. Lawrence—just near enough to claim certain privileges as a member of the same family. I announced my arrival by wire this morning, and fairly electrified them, I believe. The hop, of course, was a surprise for me. I came down really to see you."

"Yes!" she said; and stood there, embarrassed and deeply stirred, playing with a large white fan she car-

ried, realising the inadequacy of that bald response, and unable at the moment to think of anything to say.

"It's ages since I saw you," he added, pushing a low chair toward her, and taking another opposite when she had seated herself. "Do you remember, Beatrice, those days on the river? . . ." He leaned nearer to her and scrutinised her attentively. "The freckle has vanished," he said. "The sun doesn't kiss you here."

"Not in December certainly," she answered; and tried unsuccessfully to make her voice sound friendly and detached; despite her endeavour its tones were tremulous. Why need he speak of these things now?

"December!" he said. . . . "Yes. It was summer then. I've thought of that last night on the river every night since. . . . I've thought of you. I've wanted to ask about you; and there was no one I could apply to for information. If I'd known you were here, I should have come before; but no one told me. There has been a sort of conspiracy of silence. . . . But I'm not going to worry about that now. I've found you again—that's good enough for me. I am awfully glad to see you, Beatrice—are you a little glad too?"

"I don't know," she answered, and stirred restlessly. "I am just a little afraid of looking back. . . . Life is so different now."

"How different?" he asked.

Teddy had told him that she was growing puritanical; but she had always inclined to a somewhat more lofty view of life than the generality; he decided that

her present surroundings possibly encouraged this natural bent.

"You'd understand if you lived here," she answered evasively. "I can't explain. It's like being a vegetarian after having killed in order to live—a flesh diet again would be too stimulating. I am growing accustomed to the simplicity; but I have not grown so accustomed that any small thing—an excursion into the past, for instance—might not prove upsetting. I would rather avoid personalities, please."

"That's just what we can't avoid," he said, with firm resolve, and was amazed to find himself plunging forthwith into the matter that was responsible for his being there, but which he had meant to lead up to gradually when she had got over her first surprise at seeing him. "The personal note comes into everything. It's because of what you stand for to me that I am here; it's because you are the one woman in the world to me—the voice which speaks to me above the confusion of the many echoes—that I am here now. Your voice is dearer to me than any voice—your face is sweeter than any face in all the world. I love you. You know that. I've told you that. . . . I want to marry you. I came down to ask you to marry me."

While he spoke, the music from the other room came to their ears across the width of the hall. Beatrice rose, not for the purpose of joining the dancers; she was not sufficiently collected to face other eyes just then; but because movement, action of some sort, was imperative. She stood, grasping the back of the chair, looking away from him, staring fixedly at the fire, at the flames leaping on the wide hearth, and at

their reflection in the glazed white surface of the tiles.

"Oh, don't," she said nervously.

He came to her and stood beside her and put his arm about her shoulders.

"But I want you," he said. "I wanted you before—but I wasn't free to come to you. I'm free now, Beatrice. . . . The—the difficulties I spoke of to you before, if you remember, they are—finished. It is an ugly tale, that—I'll tell you if you wish to hear; but—I'd rather you didn't know. . . . It's all finished, anyhow. It's behind me. It is not a creditable story. I'm ashamed of it. So long as it shadowed me I kept away from you; now it has smoothed itself out, and I came to you. . . . I came as soon as I could."

He was conscious when he referred to the incident which had separated them of a stiffening of the girl's whole body, of a growing aloofness in her bearing. She did not withdraw from him, but her attitude and her manner were alike unresponsive. Her eyes, staring at the leaping flames, saw dully through a mist of tears.

"Teddy told me about the difficulty," she said; and the flames grew more fantastic, more distant and unreal to her blurred sight. "I think you ought to have told me yourself; it would have been—more honest."

His dark face flushed, and his surprised eyes, scanning her features questioningly for a moment, against his volition sought the carpet and fell to studying its pattern unconsciously. He was more dismayed and astonished by her admission than she supposed. Edward Ashleigh had given him no reason to suspect that he had confided that story to his sister.

"I thought of telling you," he confessed; "but I wasn't sure you'd understand. I'd have taken the risk if I had guessed Teddy would get before me," he added, with resentment. "I believed he was my friend."

"He is your friend," she answered quietly. "At the same time, he is my brother, and regards that a greater responsibility."

"Yes," he said, and bit his lip, unable to dispute the soundness of this argument. "But—he has prejudiced you. It wasn't fair to me. He ought to have given me the choice of telling you myself."

"You had the choice," she reminded him. "You didn't take it. But I am not prejudiced. I'm just—sorry."

"That means," he said harshly, "that you hold me entirely blameworthy—that you condemn me on the bald facts. You won't listen to my side." He gave a short, angry laugh. "You realise, of course, that I have no case to present. A man, unless he is a cad, doesn't seek to justify himself in an affair of this nature."

He walked away from her and took his stand by the hearth, leaning with his arm on the mantel-shelf, one foot on the marble curb.

"I wish I had known before I came down," he said, tapping the curb with an impatient foot.

He did not give expression to the question in his mind which framed the wonder why Edward Ashleigh had confided to him his sister's address. He had taken it at the time as a permission to visit her; but now he failed to understand the reason for the confidence.

Abruptly he ceased to wonder, and gave his whole attention to Beatrice—to the urgency of his desire for her, despite the hopeless sense of defeat which gripped him in face of her quiet, restrained disapproval.

“Look here, Beatrice,” he began. “It isn’t any sort of use trying to explain. One can’t explain these things. I don’t wish to attempt to justify myself, but I do want to say here and now that since I knew you I have been ashamed—filled with remorse. I’ve walked the straight path as far as it was humanly possible from the moment—not of our meeting, but of my first real interest in yourself. If I had known you earlier, this thing could never have happened. I drifted into it. When I came to know you I felt disgust with myself for this casual drifting into sin. One thinks lightly of it at the time; but a man hates impurity as much as a woman hates it when he meets love for the first time. My dear, I hate to soil your ears with these things—I hate myself when I recall them. I love you, Beatrice. I want you. The question is, do you love me sufficiently to forgive the past and overlook it? That is the question I have come down to ask you.”

He felt while he spoke almost glad that she knew the truth. It was better that she should know beforehand—better that he should not be forced to tell her, nor have overhanging him the fear that she would later discover it and recoil from him when such a recoil could only mean tragedy for both. But in his relief he lost sight of the fact that to Beatrice in the sudden shock of seeing him these things might assume disproportionate dimensions. She was not in a mood to regard them dispassionately. She was not tempera-

mentally constituted to suffer such revelations unmoved at any time. He would have been wiser had he given her time to recover from her surprise. When he finished speaking, when he paused and looked to her for an answer, she avoided his eyes and deliberately looked away from him, looked about her vaguely at the unfamiliar room, at the shadows lurking in the corners, and at the flickering of the firelight upon the heavy beamed ceiling; then, with a sound like a sob in her throat, she groped blindly for the door.

"I can't," she said . . . "I can't. I am narrow, I suppose—or perhaps I don't love enough. . . . I can't."

And with nothing more, with only the distressful sound of that catching of the breath, she went swiftly out of the room and closed the door behind her.

XXVI

STRANGELY, through the confusion of her thoughts as she ran upstairs and sought the privacy of Enid's bedroom, the knowledge that she had told her driver to return for her at one o'clock came to Beatrice with a sense of relief. Thus will unimportant details assert themselves in moments of crisis. At the time of giving the order she had considered it too early; but with the dispiriting influence of James' unspoken displeasure damping her enjoyment, she had cared so little for the party that she felt only regret for having come to it; now she was glad that she had decided to leave early. She would go upstairs after supper and wait in the bedroom until the time for departure arrived. No one need notice when she left; she would slip away unobtrusively; afterwards she could explain her hurried departure and the omission of the usual formalities in any way that occurred to her; for the present she could think of nothing collectedly; her mind was a distressed tangle of painful impressions. And behind the pain and the resentment of these distresses, behind the repugnance she was conscious of feeling, was a sense of hopeless insufficiency, a limitless desire for this man who had helped her to realise the romance of life, and had then destroyed the illusion with clumsy ruthlessness. She bitterly resented that he had the power to make her suffer so—

that against her volition she should love him in spite of all, though in her inexperienced and somewhat limited judgment he was so little worthy to be loved.

While she remained in the bedroom trying to compose her features sufficiently to venture among the other guests without the fear of exciting comment, Enid Lawrence awaited her entry with Hurst, and felt puzzled and increasingly concerned at their non-appearance. When later Beatrice entered the room alone, she made her way to her quickly, threading a passage between the crush, and asked in an undertone:

"Where is Fred?"

"I left him," Beatrice replied, "in the study."

"Oh, Beatrice!" Enid said, reproach in her tones.

Then she noticed the other's pale preoccupation, the pain and the tension of her look; and she realised that here was something which she did not understand—something which sprang neither from caprice nor coldness—something which hurt. She put a hand within Beatrice's arm.

"I'm sorry," she said simply.

That, it seemed to Beatrice, was the burden of her own thoughts, the reflex of her innermost feeling—sorrow—regret for the waste of emotion, for the needlessness of this pain which dragged at her heart and reopened all the distresses of the past. He ought never to have come down; it had served only to revive the memories which were almost forgotten, and which it were better to forget.

She suffered Enid to draw her into the room. Someone provided her with a programme, which she relinquished to the first comer, and afterwards watched

it filling up with detached interest and apathetic eyes. When it came to the second half she declined making any engagements; she would be leaving after supper, she stated.

As the evening wore on and Hurst made no appearance her mind was relieved. She had dreaded more than anything the thought of facing him before these gay, unsuspecting people—before Enid, who was not unsuspecting, who was undoubtedly the recipient of her cousin's confidence; it would have been impossible to maintain an outwardly smiling indifference had he been present; it was not easy in any circumstance to carry oneself as though nothing were amiss. And with Enid's perplexed and vaguely troubled eyes searching for her through the moving throng—seeking her out—watching her. . . . The effect of those watchful, anxious eyes was disturbing; it had the result of making her painfully self-conscious, so that she wondered whether traces of emotion were apparent in her face, whether any of her partners detected something unusual in her manner. For the greater part the men were strangers to her; and if they noticed anything, it was, as one man expressed it, that the best-looking girl in the room was a trifle dull.

She made her escape after supper. She went upstairs and got into her cloak and waited for the arrival of the cab. She did not hear it drive up; the music drowned the sound of the wheels; it was some time later that a maid discovered her in the bedroom and told her it was waiting. She went downstairs, hoping to get away unseen; a couple sitting out on the wide landing paused in the middle of a mild flirta-

tion to look after her, and two men, smoking cigarettes in the hall, spoke to her as she passed them and remonstrated with her for leaving so early. One of them went with her to the top of the steps. It had been his intention to see her into the cab, but at the foot of the steps someone else waited presumedly for that purpose, since, when she appeared, he stepped more fully into the light and opened the cab door and stood beside it.

"I see you are all right," Beatrice's escort said, and shook hands with her, and turned back wondering where on earth the fellow had sprung from, and how it was he had not seen him before.

Beatrice walked down the broad, low steps between the lines of gaily coloured lanterns. She drew her wraps more closely about her as she faced the cold of the early morning. The air struck chill; her thoughts struck chill; the winter of discontent enveloped everything. During that brief journey from the warmed and lighted house to the cold, musty interior of the unlighted cab many things flashed through her mind. She saw, not as a drowning person is supposed to see the incidents of his life unfolding before his mental vision, but certain incidents in the life of the man who waited for her at the foot of the steps, and their effect in relation, less to herself than to the woman who had discarded husband and home and honour for his sake. This woman who had given up everything for him had a claim on him; to ignore it, to thrust it aside, was unthinkable. If she had sinned, she had also suffered, and she must have loved. Beatrice was incapable of jealousy; and disloyalty to one's

sex arises chiefly from this passion. This woman had not set out deliberately to injure her; yet, selfish and weak and vicious, she had injured her grievously though unconsciously. In giving rein to unlawful desires the security of others is inevitably threatened.

When she reached the path Beatrice stood still and held out a hand to Hurst in silent farewell. He disregarded this dismissal and followed her determinedly into the cab.

"I'm coming with you," he said, as he got in and jerked the door to upon himself. "I've things to say to you. I can't part from you like this. Don't you see," he said, as she maintained silence, and he looked towards her averted face, which showed dim and uncertain in the obscurity against the dingy upholstery, like a mask, featureless and without expression, "that it's impossible for me to go back to-morrow and leave matters at this stage? I must have a few last words with you. When I came down I didn't think—I hoped I'd be staying on. Now I'm going back—by the first train in the morning . . . that's why I thrust myself on you now. I must have further talk with you. You are blaming me . . . I'm blameworthy, I know. I'm not seeking to justify myself—only it all happened before I knew you." He felt it necessary to insist on this point. "I want to make you understand that. If I had known you first it couldn't have happened."

He put out a hand and caught at her loose sleeve, and found and held her gloved, unresponsive fingers.

"Beatrice, I love you," he mumbled, and it sounded in her shuddering ears in the darkness almost as though he sobbed. "I love you so. Haven't I a

chance?—a remote chance? You care for me. I'll swear to that. Can't you give me a word of hope? I'll wait—as long as you wish. But don't say no outright, I"—he dragged her nearer to him—"I couldn't stand it. Sweet, I want you so."

He attempted to kiss her; he struggled with her in the darkness. She put her hands on his shoulders and pushed him back, and drew further into her corner, sitting upright, white and aloof and dignified, baffling and exasperating him by her silence and unresponsiveness. He could not get at her, could not move her; his appeal, his passion, both failed before her quiet remoteness.

"I did not think you were so cold," he said bitterly. "I begin to believe you don't care. . . . It is impossible that you should care and remain so indifferent. You've forgotten—that's it. . . . You did care once. And now you have forgotten. Possibly there is someone else. . . ."

He paused and loosened her hand and sat back, considering this possibility.

"There is someone else," he finally decided.

"No," Beatrice answered, stung into speech at last.

"Then, if there is no one else, if you really care, why are you so cold?—so hard and unforgiving? It—it's inhuman."

"Perhaps that's what I am," she said quietly. "I've loved you—I do love you—but not blindly. My love demands much—everything or nothing—because, you see, it gives everything. And I can't have you—all of you. You've belonged to someone. . . . You belong to her still. She has a claim on you. It doesn't

matter that you refuse to recognise that claim—it's there. I see it—she sees it. It doesn't seem to me to matter that the world perhaps, and you certainly, do not see it. I'm looking at it from her point of view—and mine. That may be a limited outlook, but it counts. It is her view that is of the first importance; it bears the greatest significance. I'm trying to see this thing as she sees it."

"My God!" he cried. "You aren't even just. You might quite as reasonably look at it from my view. Why should your bias be in her favour? You know nothing of her. Believe me, in these cases it isn't always the man who is to blame."

"I blame both of you equally," she said. "But in these cases it is the woman who is the chief sufferer; and, in my opinion, that is unjust."

"Well, anyway," he said, "you are making me suffer now."

"I don't wish that," she said gently. "I didn't mean to hurt you. All that is so purposeless."

"You are hurting me," he insisted, "with every word you say. You don't give me a chance. You blame me out of hand. You won't hear reason. I've told you all that part of my life is behind me. You won't even allow me to bury it decently. You won't let me forget."

"Has she forgotten?" she asked.

He made an impatient sound with his lips.

"I haven't seen her for over a year," he replied bluntly. "I don't suppose I shall see her again—ever. I don't wish to. . . . Why need you drag her into this?" he asked, as a resentful afterthought.

"Because," she answered in low, controlled tones, "she is there between us. She has to be reckoned with. I've always hated anything like that—hated it as one hates disease—instinctively. I am not jealous: it is something more personal than that, more overwhelming. If I had known what I now know when we first met I should have been spared the pain of caring for you."

"You mean," he said, almost roughly, "that, knowing, you can't tolerate me even?"

She turned away her face, her eyes suffused with tears.

"Toleration would not satisfy either of us," she said.

"No," he agreed, and was silent for a space.

"So that's the finish of things!" he said, and unexpectedly stopped the cab, and got out in a darkened, unfamiliar world, and sought, with ultimate success after many uncertainties, to find his way back along the shadowed perplexities of the winding country road.

That was the finish—the end of a dream.

XXVII

BEATRICE got back, not as she had expected to a darkened, silent house—almost in the pained pre-occupation of her mind she would have preferred to arrive unnoticed and go straight to her room without meeting anyone—but, as the cab stopped before the house, where a light showed in the hall and also in the drawing-room, the front door opened, and she saw James' figure in the aperture, a dark shadow against the brightness of the gaslit hall.

"I did not expect to find you up," she said. "It must be two o'clock."

"Are you the only privileged person?" he asked, with a faint smile.

He opened the door of the drawing-room and followed her in, and taking up the tongs mended the fire, which had burnt low. It was cold driving, and she looked weary; he reproached himself for thoughtlessness in not having made a cheerful blaze to welcome her return. But he had not expected her back so soon.

"Come nearer," he said. "There is considerable warmth in these dull embers though they may not look cheery. I'll soon have it burning brightly. I haven't been in long, and I didn't think of the fire."

"Never mind the fire," she said. "What has happened to take you out so late?"

"The Ridleys sent over," he explained, "soon after you left. The message was for you, but you weren't here. The baby had convulsions. It is pretty bad, poor little mite! I told Mrs. Ridley you would be over early in the morning."

She stirred restlessly, and looked up at him with such sorrow-filled eyes that he wondered rather why she should feel the child's illness so grievously. He knew she was fond of the little thing that was named after herself, but he had not thought that the loss of the child would affect her so deeply.

"They are sitting up with it, I suppose?" she said.

"The mother, of course. And the district nurse was there when I left. They can't do much, though."

She pulled her cloak up about her neck and fastened it.

"I am going over now," she said.

He attempted to dissuade her.

"You can do no good, and you need rest. It will be time enough after breakfast."

"She may be dead before then," she objected.

"She may be dead now," he answered. "In any case, you are fit only for bed."

"It's such a little way," she protested. "And I'd like to see her again. There's just a chance. Let me go."

"In that dress?" he expostulated.

"Oh, my cloak covers that. And at this hour there is no one to see me. I want to go."

That settled it. Without further remonstrance James built up the fire in anticipation of their return, and went out to the hall and got into his overcoat.

"What an arbitrary person you are," he said, as he slipped the latch-key in his pocket and shut the door quietly behind them.

"I'm sorry to take you out again," she said.

"To perambulate the streets in the small hours isn't creating a precedent for me any more than for yourself," he answered. "Will you take my arm?"

"No, thanks. My hands are fully occupied with my draperies."

He looked at the draperies in question, and caught sight of the white satin slippers showing beneath her skirt, and stopped abruptly in the pathway.

"Beatrice!" he remonstrated. "What absurd slippers to be walking the streets in!"

Halting also, she looked down at her feet with a forlorn little laugh. She felt the cold strike through the thin soles and through her thinner stockings.

"What anxiety I am always causing you over my shoes," she said. "I had forgotten them. Never mind; let us get on quickly."

James felt concerned, but he knew that she would never consent to go back and change. She had started to walk again; he found it necessary to quicken his pace in order to keep up with her.

"I don't know what my mother will have to say to this adventure," he observed; "but I feel fairly certain she won't approve of it."

"She will say that you ought not to have allowed me to go."

He laughed ruefully.

"That's the irony of it. As though I could prevent you!"

"The little child draws me, James," she said.

And James, looking ahead along the silent street, past the mysterious darkness of unlit windows and houses, the inmates of which were asleep, drew closer to her in a companionable silence, which remained unbroken until they reached the Ridleys' home.

Things were much as James had left them. The nurse, bright-eyed, alert, extraordinarily wakeful, had just taken the child from a hot bath when they entered. She sat with it on her knee, wrapped in an old blanket, while Mrs. Ridley, with the weary stoicism of a mother of ten, tended the fire and kept the kettle boiling. She explained the case to Beatrice in a resentful manner, seeming to regard the baby's delicacy as the deliberate act of some malicious unnamed persons to whom she referred vaguely as "they."

"She's the only delikit child I've 'ad," she complained—"delikit from the first, she's been. . . . Overlooked, that's about the size of it. An' I knows pretty well who done it too. They knows I knows. Mr. Ashleigh, here, won't allow there's no overlooking; but my own brother was overlooked when a boy, an' suffered awful with the fits. We tried everything, but 'e didn't get a bit better. Mother did hear 'ow tyin' a live toad round the throat for a week would cure them. We caught a toad an' tied it round 'im; but the fits was there the same. Then someone said as a dead man's bone crushed to powder an' given a little every day, would send 'em away. We got the bone an' done it; but—bless you!—the fits was there just the same. Overlooked, 'e was. We found that out after-

wards when the one what overlooked en died. What's happened once can happen again."

"May I take her?" Beatrice asked, bending over the child in the nurse's lap.

"Lor'! give 'er to Miss Ashleigh," Mrs. Ridley commanded. "I've always said, since Mr. Ashleigh must needs christen 'er after you, that she belonged to you an' to 'im."

Beatrice sat down before the fire, and, throwing back her cloak, sat with the baby in her arms; while Mrs. Ridley, forgetful of the kettle in the amazement of so unusual a sight as a lady in evening dress in her cottage, stared at the vision in gaping disapproval, and felt uncomfortable in the knowledge of the curate's presence.

"With Miss Ashleigh wearin' only 'alf a bodice," she explained afterwards to Nurse Creach, "it was most embarrassing 'aving gentlemen around."

Beatrice continued to nurse the baby until further convulsions seized it, whereupon Nurse Creach, taking the little writhing form from her relaxed arms, resorted to the usual remedies with a calm, bright efficiency that was only a little less remarkable than the mother's apathetic grief. Beatrice leaned over the bath.

"Oh, Miss Creach!" she exclaimed breathlessly.
... "Oh, Miss Creach! ..."

The district nurse looked at her, surprised.

"It's going out," she said, in the matter-of-fact manner in which she might have referred to a guttering candle.

She took the child out of the bath, wrapped it again

in the blanket, and placed it in Mrs. Ridley's unresponsive arms.

"Overlooked . . . that's what 'tis," Mrs. Ridley muttered. "Us can't do naught for it."

And then, the slow tears gathering in her eyes, they overflowed and fell in big drops upon the little bundle on her knee.

Beatrice gathered up her cloak and fastened it. Even in her grief Mrs. Ridley was sufficiently alive to her surroundings to feel relieved thereat. The girl laid a hand upon one of hers, and bent down and kissed her namesake for the last time. It was obvious, even to her inexperience, that the child was dying. Wearily she turned away and left the cottage. James followed her. There was nothing that either of them could do; the nurse, in her callous efficiency, was of far greater use. Beatrice had been conscious of a furtive uneasiness in Mrs. Ridley's bearing: she was not sure that her visit at such a time was not rather an intrusion. In any case, it had given no comfort; and Mrs. Ridley, entertaining dark doubts of Mr. Ashleigh's belief in overlooking, had derived no satisfaction from his presence either. Yet, had they stayed away, she would have resented this course as neglectful. That amount of attention from the vicarage was due to her as the mother of ten children, all of whom were christened, and eight of whom attended the Sunday school. She herself had no time for church, and her husband no inclination. That sort of thing was very well for the rich; but with ten children to look after, and a man to cook for, Sunday was no day for gallivanting.

Beatrice would have preferred to go straight to her room on returning to the vicarage; but James threw open the drawing-room door, where the fire blazed a cheery welcome, and pushed a low chair before it and settled her into the chair.

"You are cold," he said.

He went out of the room and returned with a glass of wine, which he gave her to drink.

"You look worn out," he said kindly.

The sympathy in his voice, his consideration, proved too much for Beatrice's overwrought nerves. To James' concerned amazement, and to her own discomfort, she found herself crying weakly. Hot tears rose in her eyes and overflowed, and welled and overflowed again and ran down her white cheeks. She remained quite still, crying silently and staring into the fire. Possibly she hoped—though the hope was absurd—to escape detection. She realised, when James dropped on one knee beside her and took her chilly hands in his warm, comforting clasp, that he was conscious of her grief, that he desired to console her; that possibly he recognised as she did the futility of spoken comfort. In any case, he offered no verbal sympathy, but continued to kneel beside her chair, clasping her chilled hands in a close, reassuring grip.

"Something sad happens always to everyone I love," she complained presently, in a tone of querulous bitterness. "Life is sad. I'm so tired of it all."

Instinctively James felt that something besides the baby's illness was affecting her, something outside her present life. The thought came to him that perhaps the dance she had attended had stirred up memories of

former days, and created in her a new discontent with her present surroundings. He did not wish to believe this, but it occurred to him that it was possible.

"I wish," he said, with earnest impulsiveness, "that I could take every sorrow out of your life into mine."

Swiftly she raised her tear-stained face, the tears arrested in their course, and looked at him with wondering, dismayed eyes. A new quality in James' voice, something in his eager gaze, in the protective warmth of his clasp, startled her. Like a doubt assailing a mind which has harboured no suspicion, the fear came to her that her cousin's sympathy was less impersonal than she had believed. She knew, even before he told her, that James loved her. She was prepared for the confession which he made in the simple, straightforward way in which he did most things. Strangely he seemed to have but little hope that his love would be returned.

"Beatrice, I love you," he said. "I don't think that can surprise you greatly. It isn't possible to live with you and not love you. I am afraid to ask if you love me—afraid to solicit so precious a gift . . . only without your love, life for me must remain empty. You have all my heart. Before I realised what was happening, the gift—such as it is—was yours."

"Oh, James, my dear!" she said, and drew her hands from his, and laid one of them upon his shoulder as he knelt beside her chair with a display of sorrowful affection that was rather chilling in its utter lack of any deeper emotion. "I am so sorry this has happened. I never thought. . . . It isn't my fault,

James, that I have no love to give you. I gave all that before I knew you."

"I was afraid," he said slowly, "that there might be someone. . . . It wasn't possible that before you came here you had not had encounters with men—interesting men. You've drifted into a backwater here; but you won't stay in it. I've felt that somehow all along."

He got up and moved away and busied himself unnecessarily with the fire. Beatrice, her face white and bitter, rose too.

"The man I love was at the dance," she said; and in her effort at control her voice sounded flat and unconvincing. "We can never be anything to one another; but I shall love him—always."

And then she went out of the room, and left James, sick with the bitterness of disappointment, looking into the fire, and seeing, not the bright heart of it, but his own lonely future reaching ahead endlessly—a dusky twilight of autumn days stretching away into the uncompanioned winter of old age.

He threw himself into the chair where she had sat, and dropped his head on his hand and thought—thought far into the dawn. Time and place had no meaning for him. For the first time in his life he gave himself up entirely to the abandonment of personal grief. The church clock, chiming the hour of five, roused him: it struck discordantly upon his jaded nerves. He drew his hand wearily across his brow, and sat up straighter. Through the unshuttered windows the sickly dawn was stealing into the room. He stared out at it across the road to where the grey

spire of the church stood out dark and distinct against the pale, cold sky; and through his mind, with a miserable sense of their appropriateness, flitted some words from the lesson he had read at the morning service only the Sunday before: "And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they were bitter." He had come to Marah; he had drunk of the waters, and the taste thereof was like unto the bitterness of death.

XXVIII

CHANGE—always change. It seemed to Beatrice, who had once looked upon life as a thing complete and perfectly organised, and settled in its numberless channels, unalterable as the rivers straggling across a map, that, instead of a fixed and comfortably assured thing, life was very uncertain and purposeless. It was like a game of chance; one never knew what would result from the next revolution of the wheel. The turn of chance had ended her irresponsibly happy girlhood; had uprooted her from her home and thrown her, reluctant yet incapable of resistance, among strangers. The wheel revolved once more, again dragging her with it; and now it thrust her forth from this new home, which James' love, her inability to return it, had made impossible for her. There was no choice open to her; she could not stay.

James relieved the immediate embarrassment by going off hurriedly and without preparation to take duty for a sick friend somewhere in the north. His arrangements were so startlingly abrupt that his parents must have divined something of the nature of the trouble which prompted his unusual action; but they did not remark on it either to him or to each other: they were curiously reserved and loyal in their affection for James.

When he was gone, Beatrice completed her own

arrangements; and a few days later she made the journey to the station behind the fat pony, which Hurden drove; and with Mrs. Ashleigh, manifestly puzzled and faintly resentful at not being confided in more fully, to see her off, took her seat in the London train; when, moved by a new and grateful affection for her aunt and feeling inexplicably distressed at parting, she leaned out of the window and drew her towards her and kissed her with a tenderness which Mrs. Ashleigh, being unprepared for, found secretly embarrassing.

"You have been so kind to me," she said. "I want to tell you—I want you to know that I am not ungrateful."

"My dear," Mrs. Ashleigh answered, "there is nothing to be grateful for. We have liked having you. We shall be glad to see you back."

Beatrice made no response; observing which, observing too the intense and saddened regret in her eyes, Mrs. Ashleigh looked up at her inquiringly.

"You will be coming back?" she said.

"I—don't . . . one day, perhaps," Beatrice answered, and fidgeted with the strap of the window and avoided those critical, inquiring eyes.

"Well," responded Mrs. Ashleigh comfortably, "I'll get your room spring cleaned while you are away."

Then the train started; and Beatrice, sitting idly in a corner of the carriage, looking out unseeingly upon the moving scene, pictured her aunt's busy satisfaction superintending the spring cleaning of her unoccupied room.

She did not think then that she would ever return; but greater changes than Beatrice foresaw—than any-

one in England foresaw at that time—were destined to alter further the course of her life—destined to disrupt and disorganise the lives not only of individuals but of nations. The greatest cataclysm which the world has ever known was looming very near.

Beatrice arrived at Paddington in the early dusk of a cold January afternoon. She had been away a full year; and the bustle and stir of the crowded station, the murk and roar of the streets, sounded in her ears with the startling unexpectedness of once familiar and almost forgotten things. Bewildered, and unaccountably homesick, she felt a quick sense of relief on catching sight of the somewhat vacuous face, the weedy, unsubstantial figure of her host. The Honourable Augustus Enfield waited on the platform, supported and encouraged by a discerning porter, and looked with an air of tired boredom along the platform in search of Beatrice. When he caught sight of her he appeared as relieved as she did. He amazed the porter by becoming abruptly animated, even almost commanding.

“So there you are!” he said, and shook hands. “I began to think you hadn’t turned up.”

He inquired about her luggage, and left the porter to wrestle with that difficulty, and took her out to the waiting motor.

“You’ve been in the country, haven’t you?” he asked conversationally. “Devonshire—yes. I’ve spent quite a lot of time there in the old days. Pretty—lots of hunting. Pretty girls too. Devon maids, and Devon cream—and cider. Jolly good stuff!”

He told her that she was looking well, and added

on a sudden inspiration in tones of unaffected surprise:

"I don't believe I've seen you since before Ellie's wedding. You *have* been vegetating."

Beatrice laughed.

"Confess, now," she said, "you had forgotten my very existence."

"No, really," he protested. "I've caught myself wondering several times what had become of you. But one forgets to ask these things."

It would have been needlessly tactless to admit that he forgot most people until, by happening across them, their existence was recalled. He seldom thought about people when they were out of sight. That had been one of the chief and most annoying characteristics of his courtship and early married life. It had proved in later years an accommodating virtue, and was perhaps the only quality which his wife thoroughly appreciated in him. Thus does nature provide compensation for most ills if one will but recognise it.

Mrs. Enfield's reception of Beatrice was warm and characteristic. She took charge of the girl promptly on her appearance; and seemed by her way of doing this to dismiss Augustus and all other extraneous matters, and to become absorbed in the immediate and vital interest.

"You ought to have come sooner," she said. And then, regarding her critically, "You want new clothes."

"I was," Beatrice returned, smiling, "considered very fashionable in Wedgemere."

"I suppose anything that wasn't a crinoline would be considered fashionable there. How ever could you

have lived in a vicarage all this while? Your letter didn't surprise me in the least. I've been looking for it daily ever since you went. I knew it was bound to come. Now tell me—and then we'll dismiss the subject for good and all—what was the trouble? . . . the curate cousin, of course?"

Flushed and distressed, Beatrice admitted that James was indirectly the cause of her flight. She said very little about that; but Mrs. Enfield filled in the gaps for herself.

"Clergymen are so conceited," she said; "they believe every woman is ready to fall in love with them. There are usually a few cranks in most parishes who worship the curates. That sort of thing suggests boiled mutton to me—without capers." Suddenly she smiled. "Occasionally there are capers," she added; "and then the curate goes."

Beatrice rather astonished her by saying quickly and with a certain generous warmth of tone:

"James is a splendid man. You would think so, if you knew him."

Mrs. Enfield, surveying the flushed, serious face, and recalling that Charlie also had spoken in appreciative defence of his cousin, became suddenly quite unnecessarily alarmed lest after all the curate menace was not finally disposed of. She decided as a preliminary measure of caution to take Beatrice abroad as soon as her own arrangements permitted her to leave England. Nothing equalled continental travelling, particularly when it was connected with the replenishing of a depleted wardrobe, as an antidote for erotom-

any. It was as efficacious as mothersyl in cases of seasickness.

Thus it came about that Beatrice and Mrs. Enfield were in France when the greatest event in history befell—greatest in regard to its far-reaching and unforeseen effects, its influence on the world, its determined assault upon the anachronism of the monarchical system, and other outgrown beliefs in influence and the divine right of kings and the glory of war. There is nothing ennobling in war, save only as it tends to throw into strong relief the courage and devotion of men, who in happier circumstances would inevitably, more usefully if less brilliantly, prove their worth. War stands for waste. It is brutal and brutalising—the heritage of a barbarism which, looking upon the horrors of this war of modern times, one is forced into recognising is not so far behind us as we had believed. Where is our civilisation?—that garment of gentle kindliness and decent restraints—that beauty of life towards which we have been striving through the centuries? Where too is the toleration and sense of equity that were humanity's increasing and finest qualities? . . . Not lost, but temporarily thrust aside and forgotten. We shall drag these dear, forgotten things into the light again later, and look back with sorrow and shame to the period of their eclipse in the brighter days of a greater freedom and a more democratic world.

Altruism is not dead, though it is crushed well-nigh to suffocation beneath the offal of cupidity, of unworthy ambitions and unworthy hates. To clear away this refuse which stifles and get at the beauty it stulti-

fies, one has to disinter and disintegrate the evils of our common nature—the meannesses of humanity—the littleness, the greed, the self-love—the belief in and thought for self first and above every other consideration. It is just that, the meanness of humanity, that makes for wars, which are the outcome of mean ambition; that makes for profiteering, which is the outcome of mean ambition; that makes for the desire of wealth and power and place—all mean ambitions, ending meanly.

Has the war taught us anything? Can war teach anything? Even evil is not without some instructive quality. It has revealed, like a hidden sore clearly exposed by the relentless accuracy of the X-rays, the cruelty which still lurks in, and in many instances governs the minds of men.

To write of the war in detail, while the sorrow of war is fresh in so many hearts—its influence in every home—is impossible. It is too near. The story of the world war is for the chroniclers of the future. For this generation there are the realities, and the realities of war hurt.

XXIX

THE outbreak of war brought the continental wandering to an abrupt finish. Mrs. Enfield, with Beatrice, and a bewildered maid in charge of much luggage, started in haste for England; and, in the confusion of the press of travellers, the bewildered maid allowed herself to be separated from the luggage, which was not only held up, but was for a time untraceable. Mrs. Enfield resolutely broke her journey. Not all the Germans in the world should force her to sacrifice her baggage in a headlong flight for home. If her luggage were lost, war or no war, the railway authorities would have to make compensation; if it were recoverable through ordinary human means she intended to recover it. And she did. Her persistence galvanised the perplexed and worried officials into greater activity. There seemed only one way of getting rid of this tiresome Englishwoman; they took it; they set to work to discover the whereabouts of the lost luggage, and found it, minus the maid's modest trunk. But, since it was the maid who had contrived to lose it in the first instance, the loss was clearly her own responsibility. The maid bore it philosophically. She knew how to compensate herself; and she was concerned only in placing the comforting width of the Channel between herself and threatening hostilities.

Like a great many people, she had a conscientious objection to running risks.

Mrs. Enfield went direct into Berkshire on her arrival in England, and was rather surprised to find her husband there. He looked surprised to see her, though she had telegraphed to announce her coming. He had seen the telegram, but had since forgotten it and her in the preoccupation of international affairs. He was unusually interested and absorbed in this stupendous disaster which had fallen at last after threatening the peace of Europe for over forty years—years which had lulled the world into a false sense of security that left it unprepared and open to attack.

"So you managed the journey," he said, welcoming his wife with an assumption of agreeable expectancy. "Did you have any difficulty?"

"Not difficulty, exactly," she answered crossly, "but much discomfort. There was a regular exodus. Why couldn't those horrid Germans leave things as they were? Everyone was quite happy and comfortable."

"We shall have to come in," he said.

"Eh?" She faced him with a look of quick, amazed displeasure.

"Don't see how we are to keep out, unless we want our throats cut."

"I didn't know," she said. "I didn't suppose it would touch us." She turned away petulantly. "You are always saying uncomfortable things."

The uncomfortable thing became an actuality. It was possibly due to her recognition of the extreme likelihood of her husband's prediction being realised that Mrs. Enfield had felt so extraordinarily annoyed

with him at the time of his gloomy prophecy. As she plaintively remarked:

“Who wants war when everyone is quite comfortable and happy?”

Undoubtedly Germany wanted war; and Germany had it—a surfeit of it. Inexplicably, too, Germany not only resented, but seemed surprised at, our entry into the war. The German mind is cunning, but it is also simple and strangely credulous—abnormal characteristics which inevitably reveal themselves in a diseased brain. And the ruling brain of Germany is diseased. It has inoculated the simple German mind with its insane, corrupt influence—with its insane hates, and its insaner ambitions.

The Germans complain that the French, while they do not love them, understand them; but that the English only hate; they do not understand. If the soul of Germany is represented faithfully by her governing class—which is open to question—then we do not understand Germany. We cannot understand this Germany. France may understand up to a certain point the psychology of a nation which sprawls across her threshold; but we in England have the clean, wholesome sweetness of the sea sweeping between us, separating us from this canker at the heart of Western civilisation. We do not understand—we cannot understand this bestial Prussian criminal which calls itself Germany, and in Germany’s name sets the laws of humanity at defiance, and drags the honour of its people in the mire. But neither do we hate. To hate is an un-British characteristic. The British respect or despise the enemy; they do not hate.

The declaration of war by Great Britain brought further changes into Beatrice's life. Edward Ashleigh, who had left the army, and early in the year had made his arrangements to emigrate, and subsequently booked his passage to South Africa, cancelled his passage at the first hint of England's participation; and on the declaration of war he returned to his regiment. He sailed from England with the first division of troops; and Beatrice became one of the group of anxious, waiting women who remain behind in suspense, and search the papers daily for a name in the Roll of Honour.

Shortly after Teddy sailed, she received a letter from Charlie—a letter which did not surprise her—which, indeed, caused her a thrill of satisfied though sorrowful pride. She had known from the first that the Empire would claim Charlie. He wrote in an unusually serious vein.

"This is a terrible business," he said. "Of course there is a silver lining, and things are bound to come out right; but it's going to be a big thing—the biggest thing the world has known, and the ugliest. . . ." He had finished his letter with a characteristic touch. "What price my college career? I've joined up. What a lark!"

But it wasn't a lark either for him or for her. He joined because the life of the Empire was endangered, because she called upon her sons to defend her, not because he particularly wanted to kill Germans. Austrians he did not consider—they were in it, of course—a side issue; no one credited them with responsibility any more than the Turks.

Beatrice showed this letter to Mrs. Enfield.

"They are both in it," she said. "I've never done anything. I can't play about and do nothing all my life. I am going in for a course of training, so that when the boys come home I'll be able to nurse them."

"Good gracious!" Mrs. Enfield exclaimed. "Why look ahead for trouble? They may not be wounded even."

"I don't mean only my boys," she answered. "I mean the nation's boys. I want to help all I can."

Mrs. Enfield caught some of Beatrice's enthusiasm.

"I can't let you boys and girls do everything," she said. "I shall turn this house into a convalescent home; and when you are through with your training you can come here and nurse. I'll get a matron and staff complete, and turn all the rooms into wards."

"For officers?" Beatrice asked, and fixed a doubtful eye on her friend.

"No," Mrs. Enfield answered, with a soft little laugh which ended in a sob. "The salt of the Empire is of Charlie's type. He isn't an officer. Some of the finest lads will go without waiting for a commission."

All these matters relating directly to the stresses of war interfered considerably with Mrs. Enfield's matrimonial plans for Beatrice. The manhood of England was in arms, or engaged directly on responsible work for the Empire: the others didn't count.

"I would rather she married a man above military age than a man morally unfit. She is too good for any C.O.," Mrs. Enfield opined. "The conscientious objector is a man with no sense of responsibility, other than a personal sense. That sort of man can't up-

hold the Empire—couldn't defend his home. Clearly he shouldn't be allowed the privilege of domestic responsibility."

Her own son-in-law was above military age. He was, however, bent on doing something for his country, and volunteered his services as a motor driver. Such strange occupations has the war thrust upon men and women alike.

Ernest Wilson spent a Sunday in Berkshire. He came at Mrs. Enfield's invitation; but in the midst of so much activity he was at a disadvantage, and he knew it. Before his coming, Mrs. Enfield extolled his usefulness as a politician to Beatrice, and made sympathetic remarks upon the hardship of being forced by duty into an inglorious inactivity. All of which Beatrice received in a dispassionate silence, which seemed to question without words the necessity for his enforced passivity: so many civilians of thirty found the passive rôle impossible. He seemed a trifle ashamed of his unheroic position himself.

"I suppose I ought to be shouldering a musket," he said. "But the organisation of a great war like this can't be left solely to old men. Someone's got to stay at home and do the thinking."

"Yes," she said. "I belong to that forlorn order."

He flushed quickly.

"Women, of course," he said, "can't take an active part."

"No," she answered. "We can only give our men, and nurse them back to health when they are returned to us broken. We can carry on too in other ways.

But we can't fight—can't defend the hearthstone. That is why we look to you to do it."

The flush on his face deepened.

"You think I'm shirking?" he said.

"Oh, no!" she answered. "I only think that you haven't felt the call. You'll feel it presently when the country is at death grips."

He did feel it—felt it so insistently that he was bound to respond. He gave his life for his country twelve months later, gave it ungrudgingly and without regret; though six months before he had looked upon the war with the detached interest of a comparative outsider who feels that a thing which is not of his direct making is not his responsibility.

"If I took to soldiering," he asked her abruptly, "would it make any difference with you? . . . Would you marry me?"

"Ah!" she said, and turned away from him quickly. "I couldn't marry you in any circumstance. Marriage is a big question; it isn't simply a matter of liking and admiration. We aren't the least suited to one another."

"That's a matter of opinion," he replied stiffly. "But if you feel like that, of course there is nothing more to be said."

Mrs. Enfield bore this disappointment better than the defeat she had suffered in the affair of the disreputable peer. The war was insensibly altering her focus. It no longer seemed to her to matter so much whether people got married or not—which, of course, was an altogether mistaken view, since when a big war rages marriage is more essential than at other times

to replace the depleted stock reduced by this brutal carnage. But in the first shock and horror of the war it appeared to Mrs. Enfield immaterial if the stock failed all round. Where was the use of bringing children into the world for this? It was all a waste—waste of passion, waste of anguish, waste of youth and strength and brain—waste of love and waste of hate—hideous and inhuman waste.

“If the world were republicanised there would be an end of wars,” Mr. Enfield said.

His wife stared at him.

“I thought you were an Imperialist,” she said.

“I am, when things work smoothly,” he answered. “There’s a sort of dignity about these obsolete customs; modern reform lacks it; it’s a lack which constitutes the biggest stumbling-block to reform. It’s like the value of old buildings: they have every advantage that age and art can lend, but they aren’t hygienic. We like the comfortable vaguenesses, the mellow dignity of ancient things; we dislike innovations. But modern principles, like modern buildings, are the sanest. When anything big and ugly crops up it can generally be traced to undemocratic influence. There is corruption in high places—undue influence, self-interest. Socialism, and all that—that’s the other extreme. Extremes are injurious; they are usually one-sided. One wants a national government, purged of party intrigues; one wants a democracy—universal democracy. The world is ready for it.”

“And what about your family?” she asked.

He lifted indifferent brows. The war was altering his focus also.

“The individual has no right to honours other than those he wins for himself. This family inheritance system is rather like the portion left to unmarried women; it secures their independence at the sacrifice of independence. Let each person take his place; then he will fill it ably, and no one will seek to eject him.”

“If that isn’t socialism,” she returned, “I don’t understand the term.”

XXX

FURTHER changes came about. In a letter from Mrs. Ashleigh Beatrice learned that James had volunteered his services as chaplain during the period of the war, and that he was under orders to leave immediately for France. This did not surprise her. It was the kind of thing one would expect of James. And he would be of such immense use—a help and comfort to the wounded, a wise and cheery comrade for the lads who, for all their fine courage and enthusiasm, needed, often without knowing it, the restraining and elevating friendship of such men as James Ashleigh. The war has not so much produced as revealed scores of these courageous, devoted, self-sacrificing men. Some of them have given their lives for their fellow-men; some of them have won the highest award for valour. James was not of these. The courage for supreme self-sacrifice was not lacking, but the opportunity did not offer. The only reward he won—and it is greater than any other—was the grateful love and respect of the men among whom he worked.

“That disposes of the curate cousin anyway,” was Mrs. Enfield’s comment. “He’s out of mischief until the finish of the war.”

But marriage with a curate was no longer the disaster it once had seemed; a revolution was occurring

in all Mrs. Enfield's ideas, even in relation to social values.

This revolution of ideas was not confined to Mrs. Enfield: a revulsive wave swept over many minds, carrying away in its progress many preconceived opinions, removing all manner of inconsistencies and prejudices; generally simplifying in its drastic enlargement the mental outlook. It was rather like removing the purely ornamental part of a structure for the sake of light and space. The same clearing process was taking place in Beatrice's brain, taking place unconsciously. She had no knowledge of any change working in herself. It did not occur to her that her outlook on life was any different now from what it had been in the peaceful days which seemed to lie so far back in the past. With the difficult unsheathing of the sword, rusted in its scabbard, a new era had dawned; and all the pleasant trivial things which had satisfied in the years that were dead were dead too with the years; the new era was an era of greater sincerity, of more serious thought.

That spirit of restless energy, of a desire to do something, which animated women at the beginning of the war, and found an outlet in nursing and knitting, and later flowed into so many channels, opening unexpectedly under the new conditions, which it filled and fitted with surprising adaptability, gripped Beatrice. War taught the women of Great Britain many things, as it bore down before it with the resistless, inexorable, juggernaut might of the modern tank the prejudices, the repugnances, the obsolete traditions of the old security, and swept away the sex barriers with the ac-

cepted belief in feminine incompetence, and woman's want of faith in and understanding of herself. The lessons which the war has taught will not be lost.

Beatrice went up to London for the purpose of attending ambulance lectures; and Mrs. Enfield accompanied her, leaving the transformation of the Berkshire house into a hospital to more experienced hands.

"I am just as well out of it," she said. "I always want to interfere; and, after all, what do I know about hospitals?"

On the second day of her arrival in town, Beatrice encountered in Regent Street, without any preparation whatever, with indeed no expectation of seeing him, believing that he was in France, Frederick Hurst. They came face to face at the Heddon Street corner, and stopped simultaneously and stared at one another. Hurst looked pleased. There was not a trace of embarrassment in his manner as he took and gripped her hand, smiling into her eyes.

"This is good to see you," he cried. "I didn't know you were in town."

"I came up yesterday from Berkshire," she said.

"It has been a close thing then," he returned. "I sail to-morrow."

He seemed extraordinarily elated: his bearing was altogether different; he looked alert, keen, pleasantly expectant; the old purposeless, discontented air was gone. And he appeared handsomer than ever in khaki.

"To-morrow!" she repeated, and scrutinised him curiously. "I believe you are—enjoying this."

His face took on a graver look.

"Don't you get thinking that I am rejoicing at the war," he said; "I'm not. But I'm glad, since war was inevitable sooner or later, it has come in my time. I'm glad now I am a soldier. Don't you see, I've got an object in life at last?—something to do. I was just fretting about, muddling along, before. This offers a solution. I'm like that. I want something to catch on to. . . . Look here," he added hastily, "I haven't much time—just about an hour to spare. Come and have lunch with me somewhere—will you? Goodness knows when we shall meet again."

Beatrice considered this for a moment. Mrs. Enfield was expecting her back; but on reflection that seemed unimportant compared with his eager request, and her own wish to comply. They debated upon where they should lunch, and finally decided for the nearest place, which enjoyed a certain reputation for its cuisine, and where the band did not play during meals.

"I want to talk," he said.

They sat at a little table together downstairs. It was early, and the room was not very full. He talked of impersonal matters for a time; but it was impossible to keep altogether off the topic of the war.

"It's a bad business, this," Hurst said. "It's going to be a bloody business. Germany has made of war a fine art—if one can lift to the level of art anything so devilishly destructive. We are coming out on top, mind you—and we are coming out a bigger nation than before. But we shall suffer humiliation and sorrow and hardship before we crush this despot of militarism. We've all got to put our shoulder to it;

there's no doubt about that—men and women alike. What are you going to do?"

The question was so abrupt that, being unprepared, she hesitated for a moment, and was conscious while she hesitated that his eyes never left her face. What could she do? Munitions at that time had not come to be accepted as part of woman's work.

"Nurse," she answered at last. "It doesn't seem to me that there is anything else I can do."

He nodded confidently.

"That's good," he said. "I knew that with two soldier brothers you would be doing something. You'll set some of the boys on their legs again and send them back to the front. But"—he paused for a space and eyed her steadily—"I wonder if you are strong enough? It's not physical strength I am meaning. You'll see some awful sights. I'd hate to think that you suffered—vicariously."

"Oh, I'll suffer," she said. "There is no doubt I'll suffer. But I should suffer in any case. It will help me a lot if I feel I am alleviating suffering. I can't stand outside this. I shall feel it either way."

"Ah!" he said, and played absently with the bread beside his plate, the bread which was to become so scarce and valuable, not only to those nations at war but to neutral countries whose supplies were affected by war. "It's almost a curse to be possessed of an imagination nowadays."

"If the nation possessed no imagination," she answered, "there would be no gallant response of her sons. Only this morning while I walked down Oxford Street a body of men passed me—new recruits in

civilian dress, marching along so proud and glad. Some of them were singing as they marched. It brought the tears into my eyes. Six months hence, perhaps, most of those men will be dead."

He nodded briefly, without answering her.

"Do you wonder that we women hate war?" she asked. "Each man who dies belongs to some woman—his death stabs some woman to the heart. It isn't surprising when women try to hold their men back."

"No," he agreed. "That's where the injustice of the voluntary system comes in. Men ought not to be burdened with the responsibility of choice; it adds two-fold to the anguish. A man when he has to go takes his chance cheerfully; when the choice of going is his, the responsibility of his death, and the pain it brings upon others, rests with him. It isn't right. I've thanked God since this war that my mother died five years ago, and that there is no other woman to whom my welfare matters. I can go into this without any misgivings. My life is my own; and that means that it's my country's. It isn't of any value to anyone but myself."

There was no doubt about it that he was glad as he said. She wondered whether he had forgotten entirely that eight months ago he had wished to make his life her responsibility, and that she had refused the responsibility because she did not love enough to overlook certain things?

"You don't mean that you will take reckless risks?" she asked.

He looked surprised.

"That wouldn't be of much benefit to the country,"

he answered. "I'm not out for suicide, if that's what you mean."

She flushed painfully.

"I did not mean anything so foolish," she replied, with dignity. "But when a man is brave, and has no one to consider, he is apt to be reckless of life."

"No," he said. "Not if he has the welfare of the Empire at heart."

Suddenly he leaned towards her, and laid his hand over hers where it rested beside her plate.

"Little woman," he said earnestly, "you stand to me for the Empire. It is man's love of home—of woman, as typified in that word—that causes him to give his life if necessary in the protection of home. I am going to defend you—and the Empire. The men you saw marching along Oxford Street to-day are out for the same thing. We aren't going to allow any Prussian beast to cross our threshold. The nation that gives way without adequate resistance has lost its right to exist. We'll resist to the last breath; and we'll win—don't you have any doubt about that. They *can't* win. They have no self-control; and without self-control it is impossible to control others. A greater Britain will arise out of this war—a greater Germany also from the ashes of her baser self. But we have got to plumb the depths first. We've got to suffer. . . . It is the rebirth of the nations. . . . I wish you would write to me occasionally. I shall have no other correspondent. I shall write to you—often."

She looked at him with pleased, shy eyes.

"I'll be glad to hear from you," she said. "Of course I'll write—regularly. And I'll send you any-

thing you want, as I shall send to the boys. You mustn't think that—that no one is interested in you because you have no near ties. That isn't so."

They had finished their lunch; and now she got up and busied herself with collecting her gloves and purse, trying to hide from him the tears that were in her eyes. He saw them, though he pretended not to see; only when they were leaving the place, as they mounted the low stairs side by side, he took hold of her arm and kept his hold until they reached the street.

"You are strung up, little girl," he said kindly. "The war is on your nerves."

"What will become of my nerves before it ends?" she asked, laughing nervously.

"Oh, you'll have yourself in hand before then," he replied comfortingly.

He held up a hand to a passing taxi.

"I wish I could come with you," he said regretfully, as he shut the door upon her; "but my time is short now. You've had the last of my leisure. It has been such a pleasure seeing you. Whatever happens, I have this last brief time with you to remember. Good-bye, and the best of luck."

He gripped her hand hard. She leaned quickly towards him.

"Good-bye, Fred," she said softly.

And whether she lifted her face, or whether the initiative were his, he never rightly knew; but abruptly his lips found hers, and for the first time he kissed the woman he loved upon the mouth.

XXXI

THAT unexpected meeting with Hurst; the unusual flavour of earnestness in his talk; the entirely unforeseen development of its termination, which had altered their relationship altogether—shifted the ground of their mutual acceptance as an explosion, or some other cataclysm, will transform the natural face of things, affected Beatrice powerfully. Her whole view of the man was altered. The man himself was altered. Some psychological change was working in him, raising him. This catastrophe had lifted him out of the slough of purely personal things; his own concerns had ceased to engage all his thought, had indeed come to assume wholly unimportant dimensions. It is doubtful even whether at that time he gave more than a passing thought to the one-time absorbing distresses of his love affairs. If, when he met Beatrice again, some of the old longing revived, it was merely transitory. He had no thought then of wooing, far less of marriage. His attitude towards these things was detached—rather the attitude of a man who has married and become a widower under peculiarly painful circumstances, and feels now only the urgency to defend what is left to him—the home of his buried hopes. He was relieved, as he had admitted to Beatrice, that no tie held him other than patriotism. It left him curiously free and independ-

ent. The complaint of loneliness was something he could not understand.

With Beatrice also these things had ceased to signify. Nothing of what had once passed between them seemed to her to matter any more. They had ceased to be lovers. They were comrades, faced by a common danger, moved to unusual enterprise, to a swift, responsive attention that only needed a signal to become active and energetic; and conscious only of an intense kindliness, a warmth of mutual affection which neither had experienced before, and which brought a new agreeable quality of intimacy into their relationship.

She appreciated Hurst's attitude in regard to the war; she liked too his expectation, almost his demand, that she should do her bit; liked it because it proved that it mattered to him. She counted somehow in his life, as he counted in hers. They could not separate their interests entirely.

She felt solicitous for his safety, and very tender after they parted towards him in her thoughts. She was glad to remember that he had kissed her. Strangely, she could think of him now altogether kindly and without resentment; could think too of the woman who for a short while had been in his life without aversion. All that mattered so little. It was but a phase of life—one of life's ugly phases. She realised that she had exaggerated the importance of this thing, as women incline to exaggerate what they do not understand. The war had given her a better understanding of him and of life. Her former outlook had lacked breadth, and a narrow view is not

merely defective; it is frequently unjust. That thought came to her with something like a shock of surprise. She had been unjust. She had not tried, had not wished to view the matter from any point but the one. The thing had repelled her; that repulsion had corroded all her thoughts of him, until she had come to consider him entirely lacking in the moral sense. Now that she saw things more clearly, with a saner, an unbiassed judgment, she knew that she stood convicted of injustice. She had held such conventional ideas of life. All that was upset with the general upheaval. He had at lunch expressed something of what she felt when he said: "Nothing can be the same, none of us will ever be quite the same again. . . ." None of us—not even those whom the war has left unscathed.

Some months later Charlie went to the front. There was not in the early days of the war the dispatch, or any promise of that dispatch, which characterised the latter part. It took a long time to transform conservative England from a complacent, ease-loving nation into the energetic nation under arms which later arose, and amazed the world by throttling deliberately its old voluntary system, with other obsolete ideals. Many cherished beliefs were abandoned during those years of struggle, abandoned painfully. Men part with their beliefs as grudgingly—more grudgingly than some men part with their lives.

Charlie had chafed at the delay; now that the waiting was finished the old cheery satisfaction with life returned. The last night in England he spent with his sister at Mrs. Enfield's. They sat through the night,

and talked away the hours until five o'clock, when he had to go. Ellie was there, a worried, perplexed Ellie; resentful at this upsetting of her careless, pleasant life; puzzled to understand why England should interfere in other people's quarrels.

Charlie sat on the sofa between her and Beatrice, with an arm round each of them; while Mrs. Enfield sat opposite, observing him with wistful, affectionate eyes, hating the Kaiser and all things Teutonic for this savage demand for blood sacrifice that was going to rob, not only England, but the best part of the world, of the flower and youth of its manhood. War was a stupid, brutal affair. Why could not men recognise how futile it was, and resort to more dignified methods of settling international jealousies? Involuntarily she glanced at her daughter, shortly to become a mother.

"If men had the bearing of children," was her reflection, "they would have a greater respect for life."

"I wish you hadn't joined," Ellie complained. "All the nicest men are going. Everything will be so dull."

Charlie smiled into the protesting eyes. It had never been for any mental quality that he had been fond of Ellie.

"You wouldn't think much of me if I didn't go," he said. "After the doings in Belgium every decent man feels he has to go. They'd come over here and do the same, if we let them. Everyone turns out, you know, to stop a mad dog."

"Well, there's one thing certain," Ellie said comfortably, "a gigantic war like this can't last long. It disorganises the whole world."

"The world will have to adapt itself," he replied.

"Light me a cigarette, Ellie, and don't make bets on the finish before a thing is well begun."

"Oh, you!" she cried, making play with her pretty ringed hands in complying with his request. "You won't let me be cheerful. But I'm not going to worry. I'm going to look on the bright side. I feel quite comfortable about you. I am sure everything will be all right."

"If it comes to that," he retorted, "I don't see that you have any right to worry about me."

She laughed and patted his cheek affectionately.

"The soldier man is every woman's love, and every woman's responsibility," she answered.

Mrs. Enfield concerned herself about his kit. Had he got plenty of socks? Socks, she understood, were most important; it was so essential to keep the feet dry.

"You are coming out in a new light," he said, and grinned broadly. "I believe you will be knitting me socks before long."

"War makes one think of things one hasn't been accustomed to think of," she admitted.

"Well, it won't be your fault if I haven't plenty of everything," he said. "You've just showered gifts upon me. As for cigarettes, I've never smoked so many in all my life as during the past month or two."

He wanted to thank her, but found no words in which to do it. His affection for Mrs. Enfield had leapt forward with great strides, not on account of the gifts—she was always generous—but because of the almost maternal solicitude she betrayed for him at that time.

"We'll see, the girls and I," she said, smiling, "that

you don't lack smokes. Men have such an extraordinary number of these indispensable wants."

"That's a tactful way of describing bad habits," he returned. "It's awfully jolly of you to look to my material needs. Those parcels of yours remind me of conjuring tricks—they are packed on the intensive principle; one keeps on dipping in, and the supply seems inexhaustible. I believe we borrowed that conjuring idea from the spiders—that trick of theirs of fetching up cobweb from their insides, for instance. It always baffled me to understand how they managed that. One wonders where it all comes from. It's the same with your parcels. When I've tumbled the things out I can never get them back again. And you do know how to choose a cigarette."

"For you—yes," she returned. "I go to the Stores, and ask the intelligent person there to recommend the most likely brand to suit the fastidious palate of a private who was once a nut. I am glad you approve his selection. I don't know what the brand is. They go down to Augustus' account. But I do pack the parcels myself."

"You are a brick," he said. "It's the thought that matters, not the bill."

Mrs. Enfield, at the risk of losing her cook, had arranged for a late supper, which they took at half-past three—a merry meal, despite the fact that two of the women felt anxious, and one was sick at heart. The least concerned of the quartette was Charlie. He rallied Beatrice on her silence, and teased Ellie, and toasted the three of them in some of Augustus' very excellent champagne.

"All this is such a waste," he said, and laughed, when Mrs. Enfield pressed sweets on him. "You are overlooking the cross-Channel trip."

Ellie shivered.

"I hate the Channel," she said.

Abruptly his eyes travelled to her face and fastened upon hers. He had asked her once to cross the Channel with him, and she had refused. He wondered if she remembered.

"You were always a little coward," he said, and his eyes smiled into hers.

For a moment she continued to look at him intently; then she flushed and looked away.

"Yes, I suppose so. Sometimes I wish I had been braver," she returned.

At five o'clock he left them in the cold, raw darkness of a December morning. They followed him out to the hall; and Ellie helped him on with the becoming Service coat which was almost too heavy for her to hold.

"You look lovely," she said, surveying him admiringly, whereat everybody laughed.

They laughed at so little that morning, standing together in the warm, brightly lit hall—laughed with a readiness that suggested nerves strung to high tension, and the consciousness that if they did not laugh they might break down. Each in her different way loved the gay, jolly lad who was going out to face death with so gallant and cheerful a spirit. He swung round and lifted Ellie off her feet and kissed her.

"You're a dear," he said. "It's just as well Ark-

wright isn't here—though he couldn't prevent me, if he were. You've always been my little pal."

And Beatrice, watching him, hearing him murmur against Ellie's smiling lips, felt a quick stab of pain at the knowledge which came to her with a desolating sense of conviction that this thing had mattered to Charlie: it had not been a boyish affection; he loved as a man loves; he was hungry for Ellie.

He set her on her feet again with an awkward laugh, and somewhat abruptly took his leave of the others and went away in the dawn.

"Come back," Ellie called after him, standing in the doorway, the light behind her throwing her small figure into sharp relief. "Come back soon—dear."

His voice came to her strongly through the fog-laden atmosphere.

"Go in, Ellie. You'll catch your death of cold. Of course I'll come back to the sweetest girl I know."

Then the mist swallowed him; and it was Beatrice who drew Ellie inside and closed the door quietly. When she turned, it was to find Ellie sobbing, with her face puckered miserably like a distressed child's.

"I hate those ridiculous goose-stepping, beer-swilling Germans," she cried pettishly. "They are a nation of tin soldiers—tumbled out of their box."

"We've got to put them back," Beatrice said, "and tidy up the mess."

"I wonder if our boys will succeed in doing it," Mrs. Enfield speculated, with a touch of that rare pessimism which at certain periods of the war affected a few—a very few—people in these Isles. "They are

packed on the intensive principle too, and our army isn't."

Our army was not at that time; but before the finish it had swelled from a brave handful to the glorious army of millions that won for the Empire on land a prestige which the navy has long held, and still holds, at sea.

XXXII

CHARLIE did not come back. Before December was out the news arrived that he was killed. In the first shock of grief, Beatrice thought only, cared only, that he was dead; later she felt resentful that he should have died so soon. He would have wished to have gone through more, seen more. To use a phrase of his own, he had had no run for his money. And he had enjoyed life so—had been at life's beginning. That is the tragedy of war—the toll which it takes of youth. It is hard to die; it is hardest when the world unfolds before one in all its hopeful promise, when the blood of youth flows vigorously, and life is a great and wonderful and untested adventure. It matters nothing that when life is sampled the glory of its promise fades in the sadness of reality; the morning of life still shows fair, enriched with the immortal gift of youth.

And now Charlie was gone; and to Beatrice life seemed suddenly to have become terribly uncertain and unsubstantial. At any moment the blow might fall again: it fell more than once in so many homes.

Hurst, who wrote to her regularly, sent a brief letter of sympathy.

"What can I say?" he wrote. "There is nothing to say. I am feeling horribly sorry for you. You are more badly hurt than he was, poor old fellow! I

know so well how deep this wound goes. Keep a good heart, little woman, and carry on. . . .”

Carry on, of course. One had to do that.

Hurst's letters were a great interest to Beatrice, and at that time an immense comfort. They were sketchy and bright, and contained very little that was descriptive of the horrors of war; but a sentence now and again told her what he thought of it, and explained his general avoidance of the subject.

“It is hell—just hell,” he wrote once. “The memory of it, if I come through, will never leave me.”

The spring found Beatrice back in Wedgemere. She went down for a few days' rest and change. She had been overdoing the training, Mrs. Enfield considered; and Charlie's death had left her depressed and worried. She was not ill, only generally out of health, and the doctor advised rest.

Her aunt, meeting her at the station, and observing her critically, decided that there was a big difference between this girl and the girl she had seen off a little over a year before. She looked older and altogether more responsible. The alteration was, in Mrs. Ashleigh's opinion, an improvement.

“I am glad you have come back to us,” she said. “Everyone has missed you. Of course we know you can't stay, that you have more important work now to do; but we are pleased to see you, if only for a short time.”

Beatrice appreciated the sincere, kindly welcome. They all made her feel that they were pleased to see her. Even Miss Gervais had forgotten in sympathy with her the one-time jealousy that had rankled so

bitterly when James was at home, and the curate's sister had feared a rival in the younger girl. James had disappeared off the stage for a time; and Miss Gervais read the letters which he wrote to his mother with a pleasure and satisfaction that was pathetic in view of the fact that he neither wrote to her nor sent her any message. Her participation was wholly vicarious.

James did not mention Beatrice either; but, in a letter which arrived while she was at the vicarage, he referred to Edward Ashleigh, whom he had recently seen.

Mrs. Ashleigh had purposely kept James' letters from Beatrice, because they were on the whole painful—particularly painful for anyone who had suffered loss in the war. They arrived regularly. The terrible spring campaign of 1915 was in progress; and James wrote from a clearing hospital near the firing line. They were the saddest letters which she had received from him.

Wedgemere held a good record for the number of men it had contributed to the army. These had, in many instances, followed James Ashleigh's lead. A large percentage of them had fallen. The Ridleys' eldest lad was killed, and Jenny Rossiter's sweetheart.

The day after her arrival, Beatrice encountered Jenny in the fields, walking towards the railway. She was on her way to call upon old Rogers, but at the sight of Jenny, walking in a dragging, aimless fashion, with her eyes on the ground, the gipsy face hard and sullen, she turned out of her course to speak to the girl.

"Jenny, I'm so sorry," she said. "Mrs. Ashleigh told me about Joe. I'm so sorry for you."

Jenny was not responsive.

"Oh, ay!" she muttered, and looked steadily away towards the line.

"Are you going anywhere?" Beatrice asked, wishful that Jenny should accompany her across the fields, desirous of saying something which might convey a sense of sympathy.

She was thinking of that windy Sunday morning when, with Charlie, she had watched Jenny and Joe meet and disappear among the barley. It was not so long ago, and now both of those lads were gone."

"I was just goin' to the crossin'," Jenny answered, without looking at her. "I feel some day I'll wander there, same's Mr. Toller's son done. Ba'nt nothing else for it that I can see."

Beatrice shook her head, her sorrowful eyes on the tanned, hopeless face.

"That wouldn't be any sort of help," she said. She went nearer to the girl. "Do you remember one Sunday morning passing me at the stile when my brother was with me?—my dear brother, who now lies over there in France beside Joe."

"Back along in the summer. . . . Ay, I mind."

"I was very fond of my brother, Jenny; and the war took him. But we've got to carry on, you and I. There is work for us to do. We don't give in."

Jenny flushed swiftly.

"I'm sorry," she said, in her blunt way. "I mind 'im, yes. I'm sorry for 'im—and for you. I'm real sorry, Miss Ashleigh."

She turned away abruptly, and walked down the lane, keeping her eyes on the ground. But she had her back now towards the line. She was going home.

As Beatrice pursued her solitary way along the once familiar path between the rich red furrows of newly ploughed land, her thoughts turned persistently upon Jenny. Something in Jenny's look, in the sullen hopelessness of her manner, troubled her. Jenny's eyes, so persistent in their avoidance of her own, had worn the look of a trapped animal. Why, because her lover was dead, need she have worn a hunted, helpless look? The girl's eyes haunted Beatrice. The pain and the horror in them chilled her. Here was something which she did not understand, but which she instinctively sympathised with—one of the essential problems of life which our social laws have made shameful.

Near old Rogers' cottage she encountered Mrs. Morey—so unfamiliar a Mrs. Morey that, but for the connecting link of environment, and the fact that Mrs. Morey beamed upon her in welcoming geniality, she would have failed to recognise this old friend whose face had undergone such alterations that, like some female Faust, her youth appeared miraculously restored. After a moment of swift surprise, Beatrice discovered the reason of this change. The relict Mrs. Morey had displayed so long was gone; she wore in its stead a complete set of teeth.

"You are looking well," she said, and stopped and shook hands.

"Ay; that's the teeth. A wonnerful diff'ence they

make, so I'm told. Alf, 'e gave me they afore 'e went to the front."

Alf was Mrs. Morey's son. He was one of the lads who had joined up when James Ashleigh left Wedgemere as chaplain to the forces. Alf had not, according to his mother, any stomach for fighting; but the young woman he walked out with had threatened to give him up if he did not volunteer.

"I don't think," Mrs. Morey explained, "that 'e'd 'ave done it, only 'e believed that 'e wouldn't pass the doctor. An' 'e did." Mrs. Morey looked triumphant. "I knowed my own cheeld wasn't sickly, though 'e always 'lowed 'e was. 'E passed all right. An' wasn't 'e down'earted, that's all, the night afore 'e left. His young lady was in yere; an' nothin' she could say could 'earten 'im. 'You better go an' 'ave yer teeth seen to, mother,' 'e says to me. 'I'll pay for they out o' what I got in the savings bank. I don't suppose I'll ever 'ave no use for that now.' Alf was always rather close with 'is money; but 'e made so sure that 'e was goin' to be killed that 'e felt a bit generous like. That's 'ow I come to get they teeth in. Tiresome old nuisance, I found 'em first along; but I'm kind o' gettin' used to 'em."

"You have good news of Alf, I hope?" Beatrice asked.

"Aw, ees; Alf's all right so far. But 'tisn't war, this yere—'tis driving beasts to the slaughter. Most of the chaps that's gone from here are killed. 'Tisn't war. What I'd do with that old Kaiser if I got holt to en!" She looked vindictive, and ruminated darkly for a while. "Tear 'is eyes out for en, I would. . . .

An' yer own brother killed too! Aw, us was all sorry to hear 'bout that. Well, 'tis the same all round, and maybe Alf next. Mr. Tozer's son's gone, and daft Will, as us used to call the boss-eyed chap what killed for butcher Hallett. And Jenny's Joe. . . . A reg'lar weedin' out, seems so."

"I've just seen Jenny," Beatrice said.

"Aw!" And Mrs. Morey folded her hands complacently upon her apron strings. "A bad business, that is—ees, sure."

"There is some trouble besides Joe's death?" Beatrice suggested.

Mrs. Morey contemplated the earnest, youthful face before her, and hesitated; a natural love for gossip fighting with a matronly prudence which prompted reticence.

"Maybe there is," she allowed.

Beatrice laid an impulsive hand on the older woman's bare arm.

"We ought to help, you and I," she said. "Tell me what the trouble is."

Mrs. Morey hesitated.

"'Tis like this," she said at last furtively, in ambiguous reference to the girl's condition: "'t isn't milk nor cream, for it won't run; 't isn't butter nor cheese, for it won't melt; 'tis like an apple on a tree—when it's ripe it'll fall."

"Ah!" Beatrice said, and was silent a moment. "What are you going to do about it, Mrs. Morey?" she asked abruptly.

Mrs. Morey stared at her.

"Don't see 'tis any business o' mine, Miss Ashleigh," she replied.

"Well, it is," Beatrice insisted—"your business, and mine—every woman's business. You've got to stand by her and help her through. I would, only I shan't be here. I shall be busy, nursing the wounded—your Alf, perhaps—some woman's Alf, anyhow. You've got to look after Jenny. It's up to you, mind, while I'm looking after Alf."

Mrs. Morey smiled dubiously.

"You always was a queer one, Miss Ashleigh," she said. "But I'd do more'n that for you—seein' you with such a good heart too, an' your own brother killed! Aw, I'll look after Jenny. I'll fight 'er battles for 'er. 'Er'll get another lad some time; 'er's good lookin' enough. Plenty o' chaps round yere is mazed after 'er. Don't seem to matter if a girl's good so long's 'er's got a pretty face. Goodness may get you into the Kingdom of Heaven, but it never got a girl a lover. Given my choice, I'd bid for looks every time. So I would, ees."

Beatrice fought Jenny's battle further for her with Mrs. Ashleigh, who, while entertaining doubts of Jenny, had been uncertain as to their justification. She was a little shocked that Beatrice should interest herself in such matters.

"There have been so many of these cases since the war," she complained. "One can scarcely believe that men can so lightly sin when they know they will so soon face death." She thought for a moment. "She was always a wild girl," she added then.

And at Mrs. Ashleigh's words, Charlie's more gen-

erous and appropriate description flashed into Beatrice's mind—a wild rose. Jenny was just a wild rose in the hedgeside; and love, which recks not of death, which thinks only of life and kindliness and the immediate present, lingers beside the roses and gathers their sweetness while it may.

XXXIII

BEATRICE sat with a little bundle of James' letters on a table beside her, reading them with intent, interested face. The last five letters formed a series, written daily from behind the fighting line, and conveyed so clear a picture of the life James was leading, and the work which his capable hands found to do, that she could visualise the scenes which he described with such simple unaffected power—could see him going quietly and with swift efficiency about his ministry, caring for the wounded body as well as for the passing soul. It was work which James would do so well.

Although the letters saddened her, she was pleased to read them, pleased to get this glimpse into the life and work which were now his. That James should stand outside the war was unthinkable. Had he not been a clergyman he would have been a fighting man.

"Yesterday," he wrote in a letter which was dated Thursday, 11th March 1915, "at half-past seven our bombardment of the enemy's front-line trenches began and lasted over half an hour, an incessant and most terrific gunfire. The din was deafening. The aim must have been amazingly accurate, as nearly every shell, I hear, got home. When our men charged and took the first line of entrenchments they found only mud and blood and shreds of human bodies.

The Germans were taken completely by surprise and suffered heavily during this terrible ordeal. Many enemy wounded were brought in by the convoys with our own wounded, who began to come in shortly after noon. Our losses by comparison were not so appalling, but the casualty list is heavy.

"Every corner of this building is crowded—men lying on blankets spread on the floor so thick one is in danger of treading on them, and the wounds are shocking. To go round the wards is heartrending. I am extremely busy; everyone's help is needed. The doctors and nurses are wonderful—everyone doing the work of half a dozen people and getting very little rest. Until after midnight I was in the surgery, giving what help I was able to give—doing the work of a hospital orderly, in short. I won't attempt to describe the scenes I witnessed; it would distress you needlessly. But the men are fine, so brave and cheerful, and many of them die grandly.

"There is a busy time ahead. We clear simply to fill up again at once, as fresh cases come in from the field ambulance. The attack has been a brilliant success for us; but success in war—and such a war—is dearly bought. . . .

On 12th March he wrote briefly and in haste. He was too busy to send more than a few hurried lines—busy helping with the wounded, and busy burying the dead.

"It is terrible," he ended. "I feel like a man in a dream—some ghastly nightmare. Would to God this torture chamber were a dream, and that I might wake to find a world at peace! The horror of it all

is indescribable. What a black weight of guilt lies on the souls of those responsible for this war. . . .”

In the following letter, dated simply Saturday, although still deeply impressed with the fearful tragedy of the carnage, James appeared more collected, and able to cope better with the circumstances and with his own emotions. He had himself more in hand.

“I have rushed my toilet in order to get a few lines off to you before the press of the day’s work begins for me, and to-day promises to be as full as yesterday.

“The advance continues, and the casualties are appalling. The convoys come in all day bringing an endless stream of wounded. Yesterday the horror of it all seemed to crush me, but this morning I feel calmer and am braced to face a new day of indescribable misery with a better nerve. . . . To see the rows of stretchers, lined up so closely that there is barely sufficient space to pass between, with their pathetic burdens, men with terrible head-wounds, with mutilated bodies and shattered limbs, is a scene to move one to tears. . . .

“I help to carry the stretchers into the surgery, and to cut away the men’s uniforms and hold dressings and tidy up the mess. The latter is a nauseating and endless task. I have literally waded in blood, and the poor fellows are so sick. It is difficult to cope with it all. The thought has come to me several times during the past days how useful you would be here. But, thank God! you are spared the horror of these sights—the paralysing horror of agony made audible. The screams of men in pain have got into my brain.

"They have sent a couple additional surgeons from the base, and we need them. A base hospital, sad as it is, is nothing to be compared with this. No inferno of man's imagining could equal this sort of thing. The Germans have lost heavily; and in the village, which was our objective, the dead of many years have been disinterred by our shells and their bones scattered among the almost unrecognisable forms of the newly killed. War is hellish. The only justification for this war lies in the promise that through this supreme sacrifice will be bequeathed to earth the gift of an undying Peace. . . ."

On Sunday, 14th March, he wrote:

"During this brief respite while I write to you my thoughts turn back to the peaceful Sundays at home, and I see the dear old church and your dear face turned towards me from your seat below the pulpit, and it makes me sad to reflect how far off these things are. At times I seem to have got into another world from which there will be no getting back. The strain of the past few days is tiring me out with the rest. It is all so hopeless. The stream of wounded is unceasing, and there are many deaths—sixty dead to be buried in a common grave this morning, friend and foe united in death. To me there is something beautiful in the idea—one does not wage war beyond the grave; though the big trench is the result of the impossibility of getting separate graves dug; simply there is not time.

"I have a number of letters to write for men who have passed over—a sad task. But one is glad to do anything one can. One grows to love these men; they are so splendid, and they shame one's shrinking

horror by their brave cheerfulness. I have prayed beside men who have looked at me with a smile in their dying eyes, and have crossed over with brave words issuing from tortured lips. One youngster laughed weakly as he pressed my hand—he could not see me, the light had gone out for him. ‘It was worth it, padre,’ he said. . . . I wonder. . . . Time only can prove his words; but they strengthened me. . . .”

The next letter read more hopefully, and conveyed a sense of the tremendous relief which a lull in the fighting occasioned the busy workers in the clearing hospital behind Neuve Chapelle.

“A lull at last,” James wrote, “and with it a sort of dazed reaction. We are all thankful that the worst is over. The attack was very violent, and the losses incurred by both sides are immense. I do not know how this battle will be regarded in the light of the future. It is not easy to determine whether results justify the sacrifice; but at least we have dealt a severe blow at the Germans and checked their offensive.

We are still very busy, and have a number of hopeless cases, and men hit in the lungs who have to be kept quiet for a time. But, thank God, the frightful procession of wounded has ceased. Men still come in—sick-list men; but there is nothing harrowing in these cases. I have been busy helping to record names and positions of graves—a necessary but tedious work—and still have my burial reports to make up. But after the rush of the past five ghastly days, the memory of which is graven upon my mind for all time, I feel amazingly leisurable. It has been a great privi-

lege as well as a terribly sad experience to have been here. This kind of thing teaches one to love deeply one's fellow-men.

JAMES.

"P.S.—I forgot to tell you that on Friday I saw Edward Ashleigh just for a minute. He came in to see a friend who was brought in badly wounded. I forget who mentioned his name, but I managed to get a word with him and found out he was a cousin. He is doing splendid work, they say. His friend was suffering from terrible face wounds—one-half of the face appeared literally blown away—a most distressing sight.

"P.P.S.—Edward's friend is Major Hurst—a very gallant officer. Poor fellow! his fighting is done. . . ."

Mrs. Ashleigh, entering the room some minutes later, concerned lest by giving Beatrice these letters to read she had added to the anxiety which she knew the girl suffered on her brother's account, discovered her collapsed in her chair with the letter fallen from her hand to the floor, her face as colourless as the paper on which James had written the information which had struck her almost like a physical blow, with even more painful effect.

Seeing that she had fainted, Mrs. Ashleigh went to the window and opened it to its widest; then she returned and stooped for the fallen letter, at which she glanced hastily with some idea in her methodical mind of judging what had occasioned this distress. Observing that it was the letter which referred to Edward, she put it with the rest, gathered them together, and thrust them into a drawer out of sight. Having

accomplished this, she started to do what she could towards reviving her niece.

Consciousness returned to Beatrice as abruptly as it had deserted her—horrible, stark, pitiless consciousness—a painful and comprehensive lucidity in which was recalled not only the written words; a mental picture was revealed to her of the once handsome face disfigured and with torn and bleeding flesh, with eyes dim with agony, with perhaps the life ebbing swiftly away. James had not said whether he was dying: possibly he had not known. And he had not known that it would matter to her.

She had received a letter from Hurst a few days before this letter of James' had been written. She had wondered why she had not heard since: he was so regular a correspondent. Now his silence was explained. And she did not know where to write to him—where he was moved to—whether even he was alive. She must find out these things. To remain in uncertainty was terrible. If the worst had happened, she wanted to know.

"You have suffered a shock," Mrs. Ashleigh said kindly. "It was thoughtless of me. I ought to have known. . . . But Edward is quite well. You must take a hopeful view."

Hopeful! Beatrice's troubled eyes sought her face. The word conveyed no meaning to her ears. How could one be hopeful when one's dearest were killed and maimed? Almost it seemed to her better to die outright than be torn and mutilated by this savage demon of modern warfare—hurt and permanently injured, rendered useless perhaps for life. It was all so

horrible, so unnecessary. Hopeful! . . . How was that possible? And then with a quick flash of memory his own words came back to her—a phrase which burnt itself into her brain—"Keep a good heart, little woman, and carry on."

She dropped her head suddenly on Mrs. Ashleigh's shoulder and broke into pitiful weeping.

"Keep a good heart, little woman, and carry on. . . ."

XXXIV

BEATRICE went back to her nursing, went back sooner than Mrs. Ashleigh considered advisable in view of the state of her health. Her indisposition was mental rather than physical; and work—practical occupation for mind and body—was essential. Besides, she had to carry on.

Hurst was in a hospital in France. She received a short letter from him, dictated by him; he was too ill to write himself. He asked her to write as often as she could; her letters were such a delight to him. And at the finish he stated simply, "I'm down and out."

The terse information in an unfamiliar handwriting brought a lump into her throat, a rush of tears to her eyes. She recalled the eager gladness with which he had looked forward to taking a part in the war. It had been so brief a part. Better to have gone out altogether, like Charlie, than to live on, haunted with regrets, maimed in body, sentenced perhaps to chronic ill-health.

How far his injuries went she had no means of judging. Beyond that first intimation that he was invalided out, he made no reference to his health or to his progress. Later he wrote again in his own hand; and eventually he sent the news that he was leaving for England. In that letter he spoke unreservedly about his condition.

"I'm convalescent," he wrote, "though it will be a weary while before the doctors will be quit of me. They've done wonders; and I am regarded with technical pride as an admirable proof of surgical skill. That part is true enough. They have grafted skin and bone and everything but blood vessels, I believe; and, judged solely from the point of view of what surgery can do, the result is unquestionably most gratifying. But—I shall be a child-frightener until the end of my span, and God grant that won't be a long one. I don't want to see you. Don't misunderstand me and feel hurt at that. I want you to remember me as you last saw me. Anyway, you wouldn't know me now. It would be like starting a new acquaintance—an acquaintance that couldn't possibly give you any sort of pleasure. There was a wound in the lung which will leave a chonic cough, a thigh wound which leaves a limp; my left arm is all but useless. I'm a cripple, you see, with a face all on one side, like those indiarubber faces the kids play with, and a temper that has got crooked too and bids fair to remain so. But I want to hear from you. I want you to go on writing, if you will. I know you will do that much for me. Some time perhaps I shall see you. I shall look out for you. When you are not so much as thinking of me I shall be looking at you from among the crowd."

He had broken off in that letter abruptly, as though the writing had been painful, and had simply signed his name at the foot. If the writing of it had been painful to him, the reading of it was infinitely more painful to Beatrice. Pity for him overwhelmed her. It struck her as pathetic that this man, struck down in

his virile strength, should let his despoiled beauty and his crippled body cripple his mind also. This sensitiveness was morbid. If it were encouraged it would embitter his life. He was attaching undue importance to the lesser human attributes; strength of body and beauty of form are ephemeral gifts at best.

"Once," she wrote, in her answer to this letter, "you accused me of injustice. And I was unjust. But I never treated you with so grave an injustice as you inflict on me now. You are not fair to me. Is everything externals with you? If I were plain would you cease to like me?—cease to want to see me? What does it matter if you come back with a different face so long as you are unchanged? The qualities of brain and heart are all that matter. Can't you realise that every scar—a limp even—won in this war adds a distinction which no personal beauty can rival? You are seeing things altogether wrongly. And you hurt me. I won't insist upon meeting you against your will, but please grant your permission. I so long to see you again."

She did not hear from him in response until some time after he arrived in England; then he wrote very briefly:

"Please write to me. I would so much prefer that you do not come."

Beatrice wrote—continued to write daily—to him with a sick heart. This want of belief in her pained her the more because she realised it was something she had earned, that it was not merely an injustice meted

out by a morbid imagination born of ill-health. He did not trust her love; it had failed at an important crisis; this to him was a crisis of even greater importance; it was more personal, struck deeper than anything that had gone before; and he felt that it must affect her equally with himself. He doubted the strength of her love. She had told him once that she did not love enough to overlook certain things. If her love had not been equal to so much, how should it rise above so much more? He did not desire pity from her, nor admiration; he wanted only one thing, and he was not satisfied to accept less.

But he could not forfeit her letters. He wanted desperately to hear from her. So long as he kept that link in the chain unbroken he defeated his ends—and he knew it. Human motives are strangely incomprehensible. It is doubtful whether he was ever entirely sincere in seeking to avoid her. His avoidance arose chiefly from a morbid disinclination to allow her to see him as he now was, not from any wish to let her pass out of his life. He had no intention of losing her altogether. He wanted her friendship—wanted to keep in touch with her without seeing her. He took comfort in this fancy for a platonic friendship. But he knew that if ever she married he would feel bitterly jealous—that he would cease to want to write to her—that her life and welfare would no longer interest him. His attitude was egotistical and altogether possessive. Had she realised this it would have saved her much needless suffering.

She grew to believe as the weeks dragged by that his love for her had lessened with his faith in her. It

was not possible that he could love her and not wish to see her. With every letter that he wrote her hopes ran high that somewhere between the lines she would read a desire to see her; but she was always disappointed in the expectation: his letters conveyed rather a deep sense of gratitude that she should continue to write to him and not insist on seeing him.

Finally Beatrice determined to put an end to this intolerable situation. Hurst was in a convalescent home in Kent, one of the many fine houses which had been given up by their owners for the benefit of wounded men. Instead of sending the daily letter, she resolved to visit him. She would give in her name at the door, and leave it to the impulse of the moment whether he denied himself to her or decided to receive her. She had come to see the futility of trusting to the decision of his considered judgment. She would take him unaware, and leave the result to chance. If he really wanted her, he would not refuse to see her when she was at hand.

And so it transpired that while Hurst fretted about the beautiful grounds of the Kent Home, irritably wondering why the hitherto unfailing letter had not come to hand, Beatrice stood in the wide, cool hall, and gave her name and with it a knot of forget-me-nots which, on a sudden impulse, she took from her belt.

The forget-me-nots and the name were delivered to Hurst in the garden. He took the flowers in silence, and stared at the orderly who brought them almost fiercely as he asked where the visitor was. The an-

swer to this question was satisfactory. The visitor was in the waiting-room, and alone.

Hurst remained for a while after the orderly left him motionless and undecided, with the bunch of wilting forget-me-nots clutched tightly in his hand. He looked down at the little blue flowers unseeingly, and frowned, and reflected deeply. Why had she come? . . . He recalled the night of the Lawrences' dance, in the days before war was thought of—recalled every word which she had spoken then in calm denunciation of the impulsive fault of youth—recalled his own feelings at the time of listening to her puritanical condemnation. He had told himself then that she was cold, too cold; that he was a fool to waste a thought upon a beautiful, passionless face. He had tried to thrust her forth from his thoughts, and had succeeded fairly well until the day when he met her again before he went to the front. From that day she had lived in his memory, a vivid picture of warm, glowing beauty, with a sensitive and kindly nature and a tender, womanly heart. But he believed still that she was passionless. He believed that she came to him out of pity: it even entered his thoughts that she might marry him out of pity. And he did not want her at that. If she had not loved him enough in the days when he was strong and well favoured, it was not possible that she could love him with a selfless devotion now that he was the wreck which the war had made him.

He hesitated, even though he knew that she waited, to go to her. He had asked her not to come; and she had disregarded this request. He wanted to see her; but he hated the thought of the moment when

the clear, inquiring eyes would lift to his scarred face for the first time. As a rule he was not sensitive in regard to his injuries. He had been prepared to give everything for the Empire—it had claimed a great deal and had left him the unwanted gift of life; but where Beatrice was concerned the case was different; in relation to her he was entirely self-conscious, even morbidly sensitive. He shrank from the idea of meeting her eyes. And she had come. She waited for him. She had sent him the bunch of forget-me-nots and waited for him to go to her. What could he do? He desired, yet dreaded, to see her. If he detected a certain look in her eyes, a look which he fully expected to see there, it would be the end of everything for him. He did not want her compassion. He would rather she shrank in aversion than that she should pity him out of a kindness that bore no relation to love. He gave her so much: he wanted all, or nothing, in return. Half measures wouldn't satisfy him; an adult nature cannot submit to be reared on bread and milk.

But he must make up his mind now once and for all. He wasted time while she waited—troubled, possibly, as he was, with a conflict of thought. Should he go to her, or should he send a refusal to receive her through a messenger?

He hesitated, and looked again at the bunch of blue flowers which he still unthinkingly held; and the brutality of the latter course struck him while he looked at the limp flowers which, in their fading helplessness, seemed to reproach him mutely for harbouring so cruel a thought. Of course he would go to her. Of course he must go to her. What, after all, did it signify

how much more he suffered since he had already suffered so much?

Still holding the forget-me-nots in his hand, he turned abruptly and limped with painful slowness back towards the house.

XXXV

BEATRICE stood at the open French window and looked out upon the beautiful grounds of this country mansion, which its owner had given temporarily for the use of the men who had gone forth to safeguard these homes with the humbler homes of England, and had come back broken and ill from the war; and while she stood there, expectant and uncertain and curiously nervous, a train of thought presented itself unbidden, demanding recognition, refusing to be set aside. The whole world was changed for her. All her old beliefs and prejudices were crumbling, slipping away from her, leaving her face to face with the reality of the domination of love—its power to fight for and defend its own, to excuse, even to justify, any act committed in its name. Only one thing appeared to her of vital importance; everything else was subordinated to that. She had come prepared to fight for that thing—to obtain it. Above all the petty, trifling jealousies that once had rankled, above the distresses of ill-health and altered looks, her love for the man she had come to see rose supreme, importunate, insistent. She wanted him. It did not matter to her that he was altered in looks—that his health was impaired, his body crippled; were he deformed and hideous, he would be still the man whom long ago she had loved when she had wandered with

him in careless enjoyment beside the moonlit waters of the Thames.

And then abruptly she caught sight of him limping painfully towards her, the whole of the left side drooping from the shoulder, like the side of a person suffering from paralysis. She did not recognise him at first. She mistook him for one of the patients whom she did not know. And then suddenly her eyes fell to the bunch of forget-me-nots, gripped tightly in his hand. Something clutched at her heart and arrested its beating, and then set it beating again wildly as he came on slowly and with difficult movement; the unfamiliar face showing scarred and discoloured in the sunlight.

When he came nearer he turned his head; and the right side was presented to her gaze in its dark unimpaired beauty; and she saw the face she loved, which at first she had failed to recognise, and beheld in this halting, limping, one-sided figure the figure which had pleased her senses in the old days by reason of its graceful strength. The face which she had not known, twisted and scarred beyond belief, was only the uglier side of the face she remembered so well.

She stepped through the window quickly and went swiftly towards him and held out both her hands in greeting.

"Fred!" she cried.

He was taken by surprise. He halted, and stared down at her for a moment in perplexity—stared in puzzled wonderment at this strange Beatrice in her unfamiliar clothes. He had known that she was a

nurse; but, oddly, he had not thought of her in uniform. He noticed the print dress under her cloak, the bright hair showing beneath the close-fitting, blue-veiled bonnet, and his face broke into a twisted smile.

"The war has changed us both," he said, with the short, dry cough which his wound had left.

He followed her into the room, and swung round with difficulty and confronted her.

"I told you not to come," he said.

She was deeply moved. He saw that. He knew quite well that she had difficulty in maintaining her control. He stood looking down at her, frowning, trying to hide from her the delight he experienced in seeing her again, the pleasure her coming gave him with the absence of any shrinking or pity in her look. He had watched jealously for either, had been quick to read her expression. She had not, he had observed with satisfaction, refrained from looking at him; but the clear eyes had expressed only a deep interest; he had been unable to detect either aversion or overwhelming pity in their steady gaze.

"I know," she said, "I have disregarded your request. But it wasn't very kind of you to impose that condition. I wanted so much to see you. I had to come."

"Well," he said, with grim humour, "now that you see me, what do you make of me? I rather resemble a badly executed caricature, don't you think?"

"I can't tell," she answered, smiling suddenly. "You are such a long way above me, so unapproachable. I want a closer view."

"Artful little thing!" he said, smiling also. "Come over here and sit on the sofa."

He seated himself with the uninjured side towards her; and Beatrice, sitting close to him, so close that her shoulder touched his arm, would not have known, but for the previous view of the permanently scarred and so sadly altered features, that he was in any sense changed.

"It is the old you on this side," she said.

He laughed shortly.

"A man has two sides to his face," he returned. "It isn't possible to see only the one."

"No," she answered. "I wouldn't wish to. After all, the other side is far the finer."

He turned it deliberately towards her.

"That is how people feel they ought to talk," he said. "But do you really think so? Aren't you pretty well shocked at the sight?"

"Shocked—yes," she replied. "If someone smashed me in the face, wouldn't you be shocked too? But would it alter your feeling for me, do you think?"

He put an arm about her and tried to draw her to him, but she held him off.

"It would," she cried quickly. "Men are like that—it's the outward thing with all of you. And the outward thing matters so little."

There were tears in her eyes. She attempted to blink them away; but she knew that he saw them, that the sight of them troubled him; she read his distress in his face.

"And do you really believe," he said, "that it's just your beauty I love? I doubt whether any man has

loved you for your face alone. Beauty is a pleasant possession, but it can't command love. It wasn't until I grew to know you that I came to love you. I admired you naturally from the first—any man would. But admiration is altogether inferior. It doesn't grip. I love you . . . you know that. I've told you so often. It's because I love you that I preferred not to see you again."

"I don't understand that," she returned, regarding him with earnest questioning.

"A man when he loves hopes to possess," he said—"love springs from that desire. And I can't have you. If you didn't love enough before, how should you love enough now? . . . I've tried to look at the thing dispassionately—to get square in my thoughts with this business. And I've come to see that there is only one possible course for me. I've got to give up seeing you—I can only be platonic at a distance. When I see you, when I hear your voice, I'm done. I've simply got to make love to you. . . . I ache for you. . . ."

He broke off suddenly, hindered from saying more by the short, insistent cough. When it ceased he turned to her again with a frown of querulous impatience.

"You see," he said irritably, "what a miserable wreck I am."

Beatrice had been watching him while he talked; now she sat closer to him with eyes averted.

"You've done all the talking so far," she said—"now let me. I've a lot of things I want to say. It isn't easy. . . . You see, I know you doubt me. That isn't altogether surprising. I've given you cause. I

didn't know—until you went to the front how much I wanted you—how much I cared. Do you suppose that your damaged face matters to me? In a sense, of course, it matters. But I love that scarred face far dearer than ever I should have loved it unspoilt by this war. I love you. I don't care any longer about anything that happened in the past. If you have got square in your thoughts, I have got square in mine; and I know now that those things don't weigh with me any longer. I exaggerated their importance before."

He flushed quickly.

"Quite sure?" he asked. "Don't you think you are allowing yourself perhaps to be influenced by recent events?"

"No." She smiled faintly. "It's not war enthusiasm. That, if it ever gripped me, wore off very early. I think that without the war I must have discovered that I could not be happy without you. I want to be near you. I don't care about anything else. Dear, surely you believe me when I say I love you better than anyone in all the world? It was never for any physical quality that I loved you."

She put up a hand and pulled the scarred face down to hers and laid her warm, fresh lips against it.

"I love you so," she whispered.

He attempted to put her from him.

"It's not fair to you," he protested, holding himself stiffly in check. "I'm a wreck for life. It isn't right to tie you to me. I'd be a scoundrel to do that." He tried to speak in matter-of-fact tones, but she was not in the least deceived. "We'll get used to it—both

of us. You'll marry someone else—some sound fellow. . . . Don't think that I am selfish enough to wish anything else. I hope you will . . . only—I don't want to see him."

She drew back her head and looked at him steadily with her clear, understanding eyes, a faint pucker between the brows, the sensitive mouth a little tremulous.

"And do you really believe that?" she asked.

"Oh!" he said jerkily. "Life's all forgetting. . . . Why not?"

"Because," she answered quietly, "I know—and you know—that to the heart which has listened to the voice, the echoes do not speak."

Hurst had no answer to that. He put his arm about her and held her close.





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